AUG. ROMANCE ROUND-UP 10 STORIES

TEN Complete NEW STORIES

Romance Round-Up

AUGUST

15¢

TRIGGER TROUBADOUR

RIFLE RHYTHM And Others

MAVERICK MAID OF GYPSUM BEND

Rangeland Novelette

By JAMES CLYDE HARPER

Free TO MOTORISTS WITH OIL EATING CARS

If Your Motor Wastes Oil and Gas—If It Has Lost That "New Car" Power, Speed and Quiet, Send Coupon Below For Free Sample of Miner's Amazing Mineral Discovery

SAVES OIL SAVES GAS

Nearly a half-million motorists have used this revolutionary method of cutting oil and gas waste caused by worn rings and cylinders. Savings up to 50% reported. Give your car new power, pep, speed and quiet with this amazing mineral discovered in the Rocky Mountains. Awarded A.T.L. Seal of Approval.

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Quickly placed through spark plug openings and at a fraction of the cost of new rings and rebore, this amazing mineral fills in and plates worn rings and cylinder walls. Ovrhaul gives your motor increased compression. Cuts oil consumption, increases gas mileage, adds new power and speed, with other substantial benefits of new rings and rebore. Ovrhaul has been thoroughly tested and proved by impartial laboratories and great Universities in the United States and abroad. Proved harmless to finest motors.

Why Pay Up to $151.37 for New Rings and Reboring?

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TEN NEW STORIES—ALL COMPLETE!

ROMANCE ROUND-UP

Volume II *August, 1938* *No. 4*

MAVERICK MAID OF GYPSUM BEND (Novelette) . . . . . **James Clyde Harper** **10**
Lovely Nadean Harvey rides into Gypsum Bend—to kill a man!

LADY GUN-TOTER . . . . . **Stephen Payne** **26**
Two heads are better than one, when two hearts are trapped on a mystery mesa.

THE BADGE OF DISHONOR . . **William E. Brandon** **35**
A range girl bucks the law to prevent the man she loves from wearing a tarnished badge.

TRIGGER TROUBADOUR . . . . . **Eric Thane** **43**
It takes a trigger tryst to teach Iris Starlin where to find the highway to happiness.

DOUBLE-DRAW MAGIC . . . **Wayne D. Overholser** **53**
When bushwhackers back-trail, it's time to corral some double-draw magic.

HITCH IN HEARTS . . . . . **P. H. Branford** **63**
Torn between loyalty and love, Laurette Sherlon decides to break the bliss bargain of the diamond hitch.

LARIAT RUSTLES A RIDE . . . . . **Anson Hard** **72**
Lariat Carson is the Colt collector in a powdersmoke payoff.

SPUR-FANGED SPITFIRE . . . . . **John A. Saxon** **81**
A young cowpoke takes a hand in trying to tame a spirited little spitfire.

RIFLE RHYTHM . . . . . **Clint Douglas** **89**
To Mirt Benton, the shadow of the noose is belittled by the searing scorn of a beautiful girl.

THE TEMPEST TRAIL . . . . . **Cliff Walters** **103**
Christine Nelson has a grim choice to make—either take an outlaw's dinero, or accept help from the man she hated.

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This is an ACE Magazine—See Page 8

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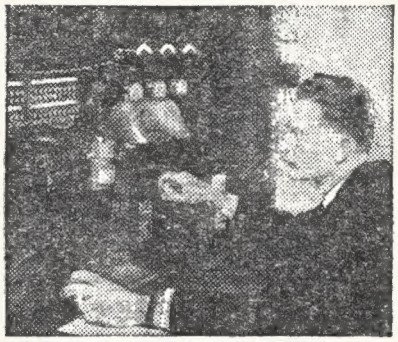

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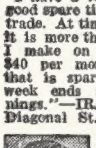

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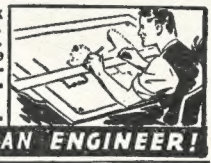

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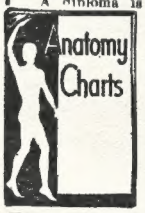

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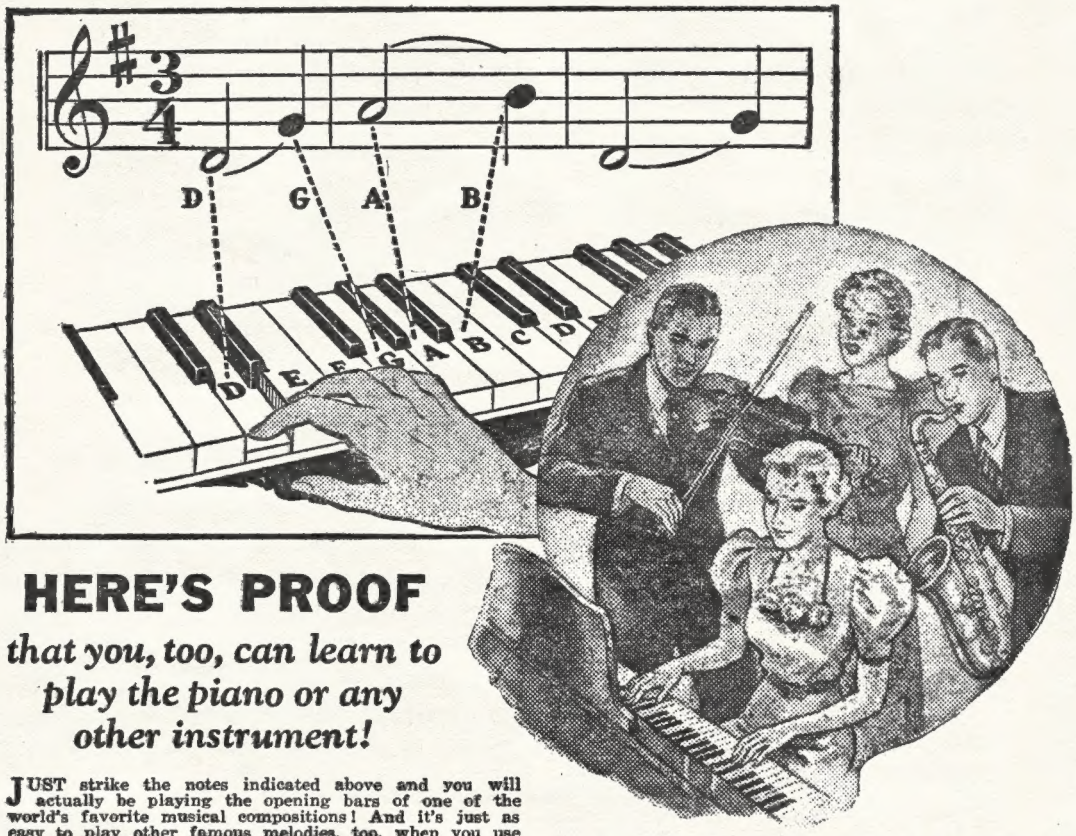

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29x5.25-19	2.45	1.15
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31x5.25-21	2.60	1.15
5.50-17	2.75	1.15
28x5.50-18	2.75	1.15
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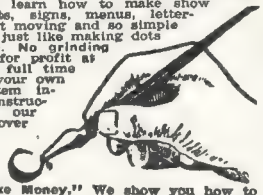

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With hate in her heart and a six-gun in her hand, lovely Nadean Harvey rode into Gypsum Bend—to kill a man!

Under gun point, the men herded the cattle into the wire enclosure.

CHAPTER I

BLUE-EYED AVENGER

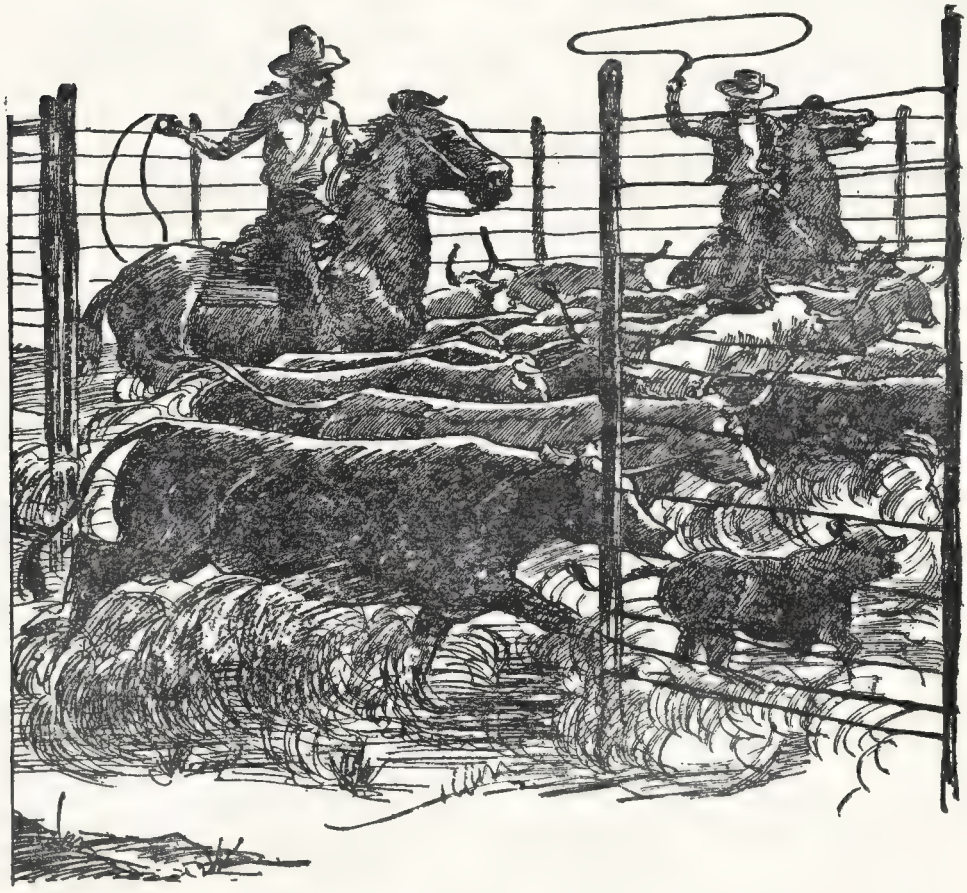
NADEAN HARVEY rode in off the range and changed her clothes. She removed her worn range garb, donned her "Sunday best." The new boots, the soft blue silk shirtwaist, the cream-colored Stetson, the gray riding skirt she'd ordered from Kansas City. She knotted a bright neckerchief around her neck, got her soft buckskin gloves.

Then she removed a big holstered Colt from its wall peg. It was one of two that were exactly alike. She inspected it quickly, already knowing it was cleaned and oiled and loaded. She buckled it around her trim waist, walked out of the house. She mounted her little paint pony, and rode for Gypsum Bend.

# of Gypsum Bend

Dramatic Rangeland Novelette

By James Clyde Harper



No longer would she depend on young Sheriff Pete Rankin and the law. The Harveys had always been able to take care of themselves. Since babyhood she'd been trained to ride and shoot. At twenty, Nadean Harvey could rope with the best tophands in Texas; could ride with any of them. With a Colt, she could split the ace of spades at twenty paces, or shoot a spinning coin out of the air. Old Tom Harvey had wanted a boy; Nadean's mother died giving him Nadean. And Tom had set out to teach her the things he had dreamed of teaching a son.

But he could not change her into a son. Nor would he have, if he could. From the top of her wavy brown hair, to the tip of her dainty feet, Nadean was a vivacious, attractive young woman. Women admired her for her

slender beauty, her capableness. Men scrambled for her smile, the frank congeniality of her friendly laughing eyes.

But she was not smiling, and her eyes were not friendly as she rode to Gypsum Bend today. Nadean reckoned she should have taken matters into her own hands two months ago. She had definitely decided to do so an hour ago. Nadean Harvey rode for town with but one express purpose—to kill a man!

She did not rein in at the livery barn as was her usual custom, but kept on up the street. Down at the far end, before one of the saloons, she spotted the horse she sought. Her eyes narrowed angrily, and she urged the little paint on.

Halfway there, she had to pass the sheriff's office. As she did, a pair of big boots slid off the desk, barged on the floor, and Sheriff Pete Rankin jumped to the door.

"Nadean," he called. "Hey—"

But she ignored him, kept on. Sheriff Pete scratched his head, puzzled. Then he noted the gun around her slender waist, muttered a startled oath. He grabbed up his hat, came out hurriedly.

Nadean quickly d i s m o u n t e d, dropped the reins, left the little paint ground-hitched. She hesitated an instant, a little taut at the prospect of entering the saloon. Then she caught sight of Sheriff Pete angling across the street toward her. Nadean thrust open the swinging doors.

A couple of men were at the bar, two more playing cards at one of the tables. Not much business this time of week, this time of day. The bartender was telling a joke, chuckling, polishing a glass with a soiled towel. He glanced up, saw Nadean, and the joke died in his throat.

The two at the bar whipped around. The card players abruptly quit their game. A woman in the saloon—especially such a woman as Nadean Harvey! It was unheard of. They stared as if at a ghost.

All except one. Jeff Hinkle, quickly got over his surprise. Tall, bony, whiskered was Hinkle. Lips and mouth flecked with dried tobacco juice, hair long and scraggly. Nose big and red, eyes bloodshot from constant drinking and loose living. Dressed in greasy, baggy trousers, soiled shirt. Unkempt, repulsive—that was the description of Jeff Hinkle.

He began to grin as he stood there and looked at Nadean, running his eyes over her shapely young body with a lustful glitter. Hinkle was almost drunk. He did not notice the gun Nadean wore.

"Hullo," he said, taking a swaying step toward her.

"Stand where you are, Hinkle." Nadean's voice was cold, stinging. She moved her hand toward her Colt. That, and the loathing in her voice, wiped the grin off Hinkle's face, sobered him a little.

"I didn't come here on a social call. I came here to kill you, Jeff Hinkle. The valley's not big enough for us both any longer. And the Harveys are not leaving. Either you're getting out or you'll be carried out." Nadean's voice spat at him. cold and hard. "Make up your mind which, and do it quick."

Jeff Hinkle licked his lips. His face was suddenly red, and it was not from the whisky. "If yuh was a man—"

"If I was I'd knock your teeth down your throat," Nadean told him coldly. "But don't let my being a woman hold you back. I can draw with you and shoot with you any day in the week, Hinkle. If you're a man instead of a back-shooting, steer-killing skunk, you'll reach for that gun and give me the chance to prove it. Go on, Hinkle. Draw. I'd like to see if a forty-five slug will dent your murderous hide!"

HINKLE stood there, m o u t h twitching, fingers working. But before he could speak, the batwings

whipped inward, and Sheriff Pete Rankin stalked into the saloon. His face was angry.

"Come on, get out of here." He walked to Nadean, gripped her arm.

Nadean jerked free. "Who sent for you?"

"Nobody. But you're comin' out of here just the same."

"And hear a lecture on peace?" A faint, mocking grin was on her lips.

His mouth set. "I'll give you just three seconds to walk out of here. One, two, three. All right then. Now you'll go my way."

Sheriff Pete swung her about, thrust her toward the door. But Nadean jerked free, turned on him angrily. Her open palm landed on his cheek with a loud smack, left the imprint of her fingers. But before she could slap again, Pete Rankin darted close, gripped her body tightly, and bodily carried her from the saloon.

He sat her down on the boardwalk, jerked her around to face him. He did not relinquish his grip on her arms.

"Are you ready to walk, or must I keep on totin' you?" he asked tersely.

Six months ago Nadean Harvey had almost given her heart to this tall, strong young sheriff. Now, as she stood there, her hat crushed, her beautiful new shirtwaist rumpled, she was glad she hadn't said yes to his question.

"I—I could kill you," she told him in cold, level anger.

"I reckon I'll keep on totin' you," he decided and started to pick her up again.

But Nadean struggled away, white-faced, in sudden fear of his carrying out the threat. There were people on the street watching. She quickly shook her head.

"No. Don't. I—I'll walk."

Sheriff Pete's grip loosened slightly. He flicked the big Colt from her holster, then released her. He crammed her gun in the waistband of his trousers. He picked up the reins of her little paint pony, started across the street. Without speaking he motioned Nadean to accompany him.

Spots of high color in her cheeks, she fell in beside him, quickly adjusting her hat, smoothing the wrinkles out of her blouse. Sheriff Pete Rankin ground-reined her horse at the jail hitchrail. Inside, he took Nadean's gun, removed the cartridges, put the gun in a top desk drawer.

CHAPTER II

Trouble in Gypsum County

HE turned to her. "You're a little fool," he told her bluntly.

Nadean flushed. Her tiny white teeth clicked in anger. Her chin lifted in stubborn defiance. "Perhaps. But at least *I'm* not sitting around idle while rustlers and murderers run loose."

"No? What are you doin'?"

"I—I'm—" Nadean floundered to a stop. Suddenly she realized she had done nothing of worth. Her visit to town had been of no accomplishment except to put Hinkle on guard against her. No problem had been solved, no future difficulty obstructed. With that realization, the anger left Nadean, and she was suddenly a perplexed, uncertain young woman, instead of the vengeance-bent gun-toter she had meant to be an hour ago.

Pete Rankin placed a chair for her, got her to sit down. He swung his swivel chair around to face her, sat down, made a cigarette.

"Can't blame you, honey, for feelin' the way you do," said Sheriff Pete slowly, soothingly. At twenty-five, Pete Rankin was the youngest sheriff Gypsum County had ever had. He was just finishing out his first term, and it was an almost certainty the voters would unanimously return him for another term. For Sheriff Pete had been one sheriff to make good on a pre-election promise. Gypsum County had been untamed, three years ago when they elected him. He'd promised to stop the killings and rustling.

The first year had been his hardest. Two big robberies, two murders, over a hundred head of rustled beef. Six men were responsible. Four of them were now in the state pen. The other two were buried out there in the mountains where they fell. They'd refused Sheriff Pete's chance to surrender. After that, outlaws sort of avoided Gypsum County. And Sheriff Pete settled down to getting Gypsum County to hang up its guns, and become peaceful.

A year ago Nadean Harvey and her dad, Tom Harvey, trailed in from the east with a couple hundred head of shorthorns, and Sheriff Pete immediately started saving enough money to build a house and the more serious business of persuading Nadean to live with him in it, when it was finished. She'd almost promised, six months ago. Then she asked him to wait until after fall roundup so her dad could sell his prime beef and afford a cook and an extra hand to help him with the range work.

Then, in quick succession, trouble hit Gypsum County. Three months ago, a bunch of Mexicans got revolution fever over across the Rio Grande. A young, devil-may-care fellow by the name of Jim Hardwick drifted down from the north, was hired to teach the rebellious Mexicans to shoot and drill. That hadn't bothered Sheriff Pete, since it was all across the border and out of his territory. That is, directly it hadn't bothered him. Indirectly, it had caused him plenty of worry.

The revolutionists needed food, particularly beef. They couldn't pay market prices. But they could pay for rustled beef.

So, three months ago, Jeff Hinkle and his three riders holed up back in the east mountains. The Harvey shorthorns began to get mysteriously wounded, the other ranchers' longhorns began mysteriously to vanish. One day as old Tom Harvey prowled around trying to find out why his cattle were being crippled, he'd gotten a slug in the back. Sheriff Pete rode long and hard, trying to solve that, as well as the disappearance of the ranchers' beef. But if it was Hinkle, he was smart. There was no proof—nothing.

"NOPE," repeated Sheriff Pete, "don't reckon I blame you a bit. Guess I'd feel an' act the same way if it was my dad lying up in the hospital at El Paso. But yore way ain't the right way, honey. Sure, you think it's Hinkle. I do, too. But without proof, we can't git anywhere. Hinkle's smart. He ain't left nothin' to point toward him. He ain't even rustled a head uh yore beef."

"No." She was impatient, unwilling to accept his viewpoint and reasoning. "But he's killed and crippled them. Five, two months ago, five more a month later. I found fifteen more this morning. Just like the other ten. Necks broken on eight, legs broken on the others. I killed them to end their suffering. Made to look like they'd walked over the edge of a small ravine and broken their necks and legs. You know and I know cattle are not that dumb."

"No, they ain't. But what makes you so sure it's Hinkle?"

"Who else could it be? We never had trouble like this until he came. Besides, we're the only two outfits south of town. Him in the east valley, us in the west one."

"It could be Hardwick an' them Mexican revolutionists from across th' border," commented Sheriff Pete, but he didn't sound convincing.

"Not on your life. They'd take them alive, back across the border. They wouldn't cripple or kill them and leave them over here."

Sheriff Pete sighed. "Well, I've wore off my bronc's feet searching them east mountains, an' I ain't found nothin'. Not even a lost maverick calf."

"You won't," Nadean told him firmly. "There's hundreds of places back of Baldy Pass where rustled beef can

be completely hidden. But I know that Hinkle ambushed dad or had one of his men do it. I know he's crippling and killing our beef, and I think I know why." Abruptly she stood, held out her hand. "How about my gun?"

Sheriff Pete ignored her question. "Are we goin' to the Parkers' housewarmin' tomorrow night?"

She ignored his question. "I said how about my gun?"

Sheriff Pete shook his head. "Not until you git ready to leave town. You might git hot-headed again an'—"

Nadean's chin lifted. "If you see the Parkers," she said icily, "tell them I had business to attend to instead of running around to parties." Without another word, she whipped around, strode out of the jail. Head high, slender back stiff and straight and determined.

At the door she almost collided with a man. Jeff Hinkle. Whisky was strong on his breath, a cunning, sly glitter in his eyes. Nadean had a desire to slap that smirk off his face, but she stifled it, hurried on.

A red cloud of anger befuddled her brain, almost obscured her vision as she stalked down the street. She knew she hated Hinkle; she almost hated Sheriff Pete. Proof—peace! Peace was all right in its place. But not when the man who'd bushwhacked her father, who'd killed and crippled her cattle, was running around loose. Grinning at her like a cat that had cornered a mouse.

She stopped suddenly. She was in front of the hardware store. A various assortment was displayed in the window—rope, nails, files. And guns and cartridges. Nadean's anger vanished as she gazed at the cartridges. She began to smile. A hard, cold, purposeful little smile. It would have worried Sheriff Pete had he seen.

She hurried inside, bought cartridges. There was a Winchester and another Colt out at the Harvey home. She'd show Sheriff Pete, teach Jeff Hinkle. The Harveys looked out for themselves. She paid for the cartridges, picked up the package, started out of the store. And at the door, she bumped into Pete Rankin.

"I'm sorry," he said slowly, "but you're under arrest, Nadean."

CHAPTER III

The Lady and the Law

FOR a moment she could not speak. Then she asked, "Why?"

He scowled. This was the hardest job he'd done. "Hinkle swore out a warrant for you. Says you threatened him. He wants you put under a peace bond."

"Oh!"

He shuffled uncomfortably. "I—I've gotta do it, Nadean. Even if it was my grandfather, I'd do it. You'll have to come to jail with me. But you won't be there long. Just ontil I kin ride out an' git Judge Roberts. I'll sign yore bond myself. I'm sure sorry, Na—"

"Never mind." She coldly held out her hands. "Put on your handcuffs, Mister Sheriff."

He flushed. "Aw, gee, honey, you know I wouldn't do that."

Without answering, Nadean started up the street toward the jail. Sheriff Pete fell in beside her, uncomfortable, red-faced, fumbling his long, powerful fingers. He searched for something to say, cast an aside glance at her. He found her face uncompromising, and decided to say nothing.

They came near the jail. Nadean's little paint stomped at bothersome flies. Across the street, Hinkle and his riders were mounted, loitering in front of the saloon, watching. Watching and waiting, apparently. Waiting for what, wondered Nadean. Then she had the answer. Hinkle wanted her jailed. Even if it was just for an hour or two. Then he'd have time to finish

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what he'd started early this morning.

Her gaze lingered on her restless pony again, and in almost breath-taking suddenness, a plan came to Nadean. She almost laughed aloud, and quickly bent her face to hide the elated smile that came on her lips.

They came to the end of the hitchrail. Five more steps, and it would be too far, too late. Nadean seemed to stumble, to lose her balance. She dropped her package. Sheriff Pete steadied her, chivalrously stooped to retrieve the package.

With pantherish quickness, Nadean shoved down and forward on his bent back, thrust out her foot. Sheriff Pete stumbled, tried to keep his balance, but he tripped over her foot. He fell flat on his face on the boardwalk. Nadean whisked his gun from his holster with one hand, the package of cartridges from the walk with the other. Then she darted around the hitchrail, leaped upon the little paint pony.

Sheriff Pete fought to his feet, yelled a command. Nadean answered with a laugh, raced out of town, waving his Colt over her head. A number of people along the street began to grin. Grins widened to chuckles. Sheriff Pete Rankin's face was suddenly very red.

Jeff Hinkle and his riders came up. Hinkle was not grinning now. "Yuh goin' after her?"

"I'll say I am!" Sheriff Pete Rankin ducked around the corner of the jail to get his big roan hitched there in the shade.

IT was about mid-morning when Nadean first rode into town. It still lacked an hour or two of noon when she fled. As the little paint plummeted across the hard-packed valley road, the wind whipped some of the anger from her, calmed her, gave her time for reflection. What next? She glanced back as the racing little paint topped a slight rise. Five riders were trailing a mile behind. Sheriff Pete, Hinkle and his three henchmen.

Nadean frowned and bent lower in the saddle. Apparently she'd bitten off a pretty big bite. Now, could she chew it? What to do? Escape into the hills was useless. She had no food, no matches.

She might shoot a deer, a few rabbits, but she had no fire to cook them with. The nights got cool, without fire or heavy wraps. A fire at night, or a shot for food in the daytime, would be a give-away if she was being searched for. And if Hinkle and his men were the searchers, there were plenty of places back in the Gypsum Bend County where dead men—or women—tell no tales.

The little paint covered the five miles in record-breaking time. The Harvey home was a square, four-roomed log house. Solidly built. Back in Missouri, old Tom Harvey had been wise to Indian and renegade attacks. He took no chances with his new home out here in the Gypsum Bend Country.

Anyone in the house, which was built on the north side of Baldy Pass, could very well withstand attack. The shuttered windows were arranged so that those within commandered unobstructed views of the valley in every direction; to the south and west, toward the Rio Grande; to the north toward town, and to the east toward Hinkle's place back in the east valley fork.

Nadean considered using her guns to stand them off. But that would gain little. No proof, surely, against Hinkle. Besides, should they earnestly attempt to capture her, one person trying to observe from all four sides of the house would certainly be at a disadvantage.

Nadean's brain raced for a plan, a solution. Out in the valley, racing hoofbeats came nearer. Only seconds, until the quintet would round the curve, approach the house. In feverish haste, Nadean took off her new clothes, donned her worn levis, gray

shirt, scarred boots, the flop-brim Stetson. She had always been able to work better and think better dressed this way.

And as she hurriedly buckled the other big Colt around her waist that was a companion to the gun she'd left in Sheriff Pete's desk, a plan came to her. Daring, risky, outlandish. But still, a plan. If it worked, Sheriff Pete would have his proof. If it didn't work—

Nadean raced out of the house, tied the bridle reins to the saddle horn, slapped the sweat-lathered little paint. It followed its training and trotted to its accustomed place in the barn.

And as five men sped around the road bend a hundred yards away and bore down on the house, Nadean ran around the corner, to the back. There she scrambled upon the rainbarrel, reached high and grasped the edge of the sloping back roof. Gripping hard, wriggling desperately, she fought her way up. The five were at the front of the house as she gained the top of the roof, breathing hard from the exertion.

She heard voices, Sheriff Pete's calling, Hinkle's urging. Then boot heels clomped through the house, out again.

"Look in the barn." It was Hinkle.

The five came around the house, Sheriff Pete in front. He was unarmed, had followed too hurriedly to get another gun. Hinkle and his trio were armed. If one of them should glance around, dive for his gun— Nadean's knees shook for a moment. Then she remembered old Tom Harvey, lying up in the El Paso hospital. And the gun she had taken from the wall, as well as the Colt she'd taken from Sheriff Pete, grew level and steady in her hands.

Sheriff Pete looked into the little gear and tool shed, one of Hinkle's men going on toward the barn. Sheriff Pete came out, shaking his head. The man came from the barn.

"She's here all right. Her bronc's here, sweaty as he—Wup!" The man's stare had lifted to the roof. Instantly the other four whipped around, hands dropping toward guns.

"Don't do it," warned Nadean Harvey. And there was no quiver in her voice, no doubt as to her sincerity in the way she thumbed back both hammers of her two Colts. "Get your hands up and keep them that way."

THE man at the barn thought he was too far for an accurate shot. He twisted sideways, his hand swooping. Nadean's right Colt roared. The man yelped an oath, jerked his hand from his hip. He stared at his fingers. Her shot had split his thumb.

"I said raise your hands—gentlemen," reminded Nadean coldly. And this time there was instant obedience.

Nadean made them spread apart, then unbuckle their guns. When their holstered Colts fell to the ground, she motioned them back from the guns. Then, without removing her eyes, without dropping the menacing muzzles of her guns, she slid off the roof, dropped to the ground with the lithe nimbleness of a leaping antelope.

"Lissen, Nadean—" began Sheriff Pete.

"Never mind," she cut him off. "Talk will come later. Right now there's work to be done."

"Work?" It was Hinkle, and surprise surmounted the angry sullenness in his voice.

But Nadean didn't trouble to reply. She picked the guns from the ground, tossed them into a far corner of the gear shed. Then, keeping one gun in her hand, and never letting either of them out of her line of vision, she went into the shed, tossed out tools. Hammers, staples, two post-hole diggers, wire pliers, a light but adequately serviceable one-man wire stretcher.

"What the dickens!" wondered Sheriff Pete aloud.

"Just this," said Nadean coolly. "You men are going to build me a corral. Every night I'm going to have my cattle inside that corral. Right

here in front of my house. During the day, I'll be riding herd over my cattle out on the range. At night I'll still be on the lookout, with them inside the fence. If any hombre gets steer killing or crippling notions again after this, somebody's going to get hurt. Make the most of that, Hinkle. Understand?"

Hinkle went an angry red, beneath the whiskers. He sputtered and fumed, started to curse. He thought better of that, when Nadean coolly lifted her Colt, trained it on his forehead. Hinkle choked back his oaths, whipped his attention to Sheriff Pete.

"What the hell! Yuh're the sheriff. She can't do this to us."

"No?" Sheriff Pete looked at the man with the torn thumb, at the guns in Nadean's hands, then back at Hinkle. He didn't seem as angry as Nadean had expected him to be. In fact, Nadean thought she detected a faint grin on his lips. "Well, Hinkle, suppose you stop her."

It was near noon when the men started. There were plenty of poles and wire. Old Tom Harvey had meant to build a corral by the barn some day when he found time. These went into a hundred-yard-square corral within rifle range in front of the house. By late afternoon the last pole was set, the final barbed wire strand strung taut and tight.

Nadean ordered the men to mount. Under gun point, she guided them up the east side of the Harvey valley. There at the water tank the small Harvey herd was drinking as was its custom, after grazing all day. It was easy for the men to herd them into the wire enclosure, close the gap.

"That's all, gentlemen," Nadean said, a tight little grin on her lips. "You can go now—all of you."

Jeff Hinkle and his men wheeled their mounts, rode off. He had worked harder today than he had in years, had tall, whiskered Hinkle. Saying nothing aloud, but muttering, cursing beneath his breath as he labored with one of the post-hole diggers. And each moment as he had worked, the hot sun pounding down on his sweat-drenched body, hate and anger had rankled deeper in him. Nadean Harvey, watching, understanding, had smiled. It was as she wanted it, had planned it.

CHAPTER IV

Colt Captives

"I SAID," repeated Nadean to Sheriff Pete Rankin, who lingered, "that you can go now."

"Wouldn't think of it," said Sheriff Pete. "I want to see if you can take it as well as you dish it out."

"Take it? How?" Nadean was faintly puzzled. She holstered her Colt. She also kept the gun she'd taken from the sheriff.

Sheriff Pete went to the porch, sat down in the shade. He mopped his face, rolled a cigarette. "It won't matter to Hinkle now whether you're a woman er a steer filled on too much loco weed. He's gonna try and get even now the quickest way he can. An' that, to him, will be with bullets. He'll be back to see you soon's he gits his hands on another gun."

"That's what I want him to do."

"Huh? Then you're a little fool!"

"That's what you told me back in town this morning. But remember, you asked for proof."

Sheriff Pete muttered in disgust. "I did, didn't I? Well, I reckon I'm the fool."

"Not a fool, Pete. Just dumb."

"Yeah?" Sheriff Pete scowled in quick resentment. "I reckon you call all this horseplay bein' smart, huh?"

"Oh, I didn't mean it that way," she said quickly. "I just happen to know things you don't."

"What?"

For moments, Nadean did not answer. She stared at the sunset over the edge of the western rim tops, at the valley prongs south and west, at the pass a quarter mile south. She started to bring her gaze to Pete, but

whipped it back to the pass. Her brows knit in a quick, hard frown. She stared, long and hard. She bent her head quickly, looked down at the ground.

"We're being watched," she said quietly. "Wait! Don't turn around too quickly. Now look. See it? Right at the mouth of Baldy Pass. There it is again. Sun glinting off metal. A Winchester?"

"Yeah. Strip's too long a reflection to be off a belt buckle er saddle ornament. What the devil! They ain't had time to ride to Hinkle's cabin an' back."

"They didn't," stated Nadean quietly.

"The heck you say. Then where'd they git them rifles?"

Nadean didn't answer immediately. She studied Pete Rankin, frowning a little, trying to make a decision. Suddenly she bent toward him seriously.

"Pete, would you like to wrestle with me?"

"Huh? Say—have you been chewin' loco weed?"

"No. Listen. I'm going to get up and go for our horses, as if I meant to take them to the barn. I'm going to make you go with me, keeping you covered. But it's going to appear that I'm having trouble with my horse. She'll rear up and paw if I jerk on her bit a certain way. I'll be off guard for an instant. That's when you leap in, grab me, take away my guns. Then make me mount, and start up the valley, just like you're actually arresting me and taking me to jail like that warrant calls for."

Pete Rankin grinned. "Mebby I will at that. What's to stop me?"

"Curiosity."

"Yeah?"

"Certainly. You're as anxious to get proof on this rustling business as I am to prove it was Hinkle. Right?" Nadean stood, smiled at him. She held one of the guns on him, motioned toward the horses.

Sheriff Pete grinned as he got up. "Mebby," he said over his shoulder as he walked toward their horses, "I oughta sock you a couple in the jaw to make it look good, huh?"

"Just try it. I'll scratch your eyes out," said Nadean, but the smile on her lips belied her threatening tone.

Sheriff Pete didn't, however. It went off effectively. The little pinto reared up nicely. Nadean was jerked off balance, and in a flash Pete had grasped her. Possibly he held her just a little tighter, just a little longer than necessary. But he speedily got the two Colts, then stepped back. To make it look good, he pulled a paper from his pocket, unfolded it, exhibited it to her. Then he waved her up on the little paint. In five minutes, they were rounding the wagon trail that led north, and toward the jail.

THEY rode at a casual gait for about a mile. The trail wound in, hugged the base of the mountains. It was growing late. Suppertime now, at town, at the other ranches. Nadean and Pete hadn't eaten since breakfast. But hunger was momentarily forgotten. Food could come later. They had business to attend to first.

Nadean looked back. They were completely concealed from the watcher at the pass. Nadean reined out of the road, struck off up into the mountains. They started cautiously back south.

"You can give me my gun now," said Nadean. "Keep yours. Be ready to use it, if Hinkle tries to fight or run for it. For in about ten minutes we'll be there, and you'll have all the proof you want."

"You seem to have all the answers," said Sheriff Pete, just a bit dubiously. "I reckon I am dumb. For I no savvy at all."

"When I said you were dumb, I meant you just didn't understand," said Nadean. "Did it ever strike you as queer that each time our cattle were crippled, it came exactly one month apart? And always in the north end of the valley, over on the

western side. The first two times, Dad and I spent hours up there, trying to figure it out.

"We found nothing up there. But back home, we found tracks where about fifty head of cattle had been driven through Baldy Pass. At that time we were up in the other end of the valley trying to solve the riddle. After the second time, Dad got to wondering, and back-tracked. The herd's trail pointed toward Hinkle's place. Dad was scouting around back there when he got that slug in the back. Hinkle didn't like the idea of his being nosey."

"Nosey? What did Hinkle have to hide? I've scouted around over there a half dozen times myself, an' never found anything. Fifty head uh scrawny beef. Always the same beef, in about the same grazin' spot. Not a head of it rustled, either."

"The times you were over there, Hinkle had nothing to hide. But where were you the other two times our beef was crippled? Where were you yesterday and today? Were you down this way?"

"No. The Box K sent word in yesterday. They'd missed about forty er fifty head. I went up late, stayed all night, took a look around early this mornin'. Just got back when you hit town. Meant to come down here an' look around. But when I saw Hinkle an' his riders in town, I figgered they'd be too smart to ride to town an' leave rustled stuff lyin' around handy. So I sat down an' tried to figger it out."

"Hinkle's smart all right," said Nadean. "Luring us to the north end of the valley to try and find who crippled our beef. Getting you to the north end of the county to try finding sign on who rustled the Box K. I'll bet that when you remember, you were up that way the other two times our beef was crippled. Us at the north end of our valley, you at the north end of the county. Nobody within five miles of the pass to see cattle going through, or see the brands they wore. Yep, Hinkle's been plenty smart, Pete."

Pete Rankin slowly nodded. "I reckon you've got it figgered right, Nadean. But if you knew all this, why that fence buildin'? What good did that do?"

"This morning when I found those crippled steers, I didn't lose any time prowling around up there, but hurried back to the house. There was a man at the mouth of Baldy Pass. He fled when he saw me coming. He was Hinkle's lookout. I came back too quickly for Hinkle to get his rustled herd through to the border. So my guess is that he hustled the beef back into a blind draw, hid their rifles, then scooted for town.

"If I or someone else found the herd, Hinkle would profess ignorance. He'd prove he was in town, five miles away, when the herd was found. If no one found the herd, he'd wait until later, then finish driving it through Baldy and on to the border. That's why he wanted me arrested, to give him time to come on out and do it. He apparently has agreed to deliver the revolutionists forty or fifty head each month. And the other two times he's driven through in the early morning, between breakfast and noon.

"So, by putting him to work on the fence, keeping him until dark, I thought it might make him good and mad, and anxious to push the herd on. And in his hurry, he might get careless and get caught red-handed. But when he sent that watcher to the pass, I decided he wanted you and me —especially you—out of the way so we couldn't see and hear. So that's why I let you arrest me and start back toward town. To draw him out into the open with his stolen herd. Now—"

She broke off. Again they heard it. The sound of cattle. Cattle on the move. Somewhere east of Baldy Pass, coming toward the pass.

"You should be sheriff," said Pete Rankin softly. "I've been three months tryin' to figure this out. You've done it in one day."

"No," she corrected. "Two months. That's when our first bunch was crippled."

"I still can't savvy why Hinkle crippled yore beef," commented Rankin slowly. "Why not just rustle it an' sell it with the rest of the stuff?"

"I don't know," said Nadean quickly. Just a shade too quickly, Pete thought. He wondered at the sudden uneven pitch of her voice. He pulled up, bent toward her. But the sound of the moving herd disrupted his thoughts. Nearer now. Much nearer. Darkness and the rustled herd would arrive at the pass at about the same time.

"You'd better stay back," he told Nadean softly. "We might git separated in th' dark. An' darkness makes friend and foe look the same."

But Nadean shook her head, laughed. A soft, short laugh that was tinged with cold brittleness. "The Harveys have a little score to settle with Hinkle, too, Pete. I'm going on."

Pete Rankin didn't argue. He knew it would be useless. So side by side they rode on toward the pass. A hundred yards, fifty. Baldy Pass loomed through the dusk.

Sheriff Pete Rankin pulled his gun, got ready to try and stop the herd, to try and take Hinkle and his henchmen. But Pete Rankin never carried out that plan.

For a quiet, soft voice bit at them from the shadows. A voice that was not unfriendly, yet not to be denied.

"Steady, hombres. Keep yore hands high an' don't move."

A man rode from the shadows at the base of Baldy's towering heights. He was tall, broad, had the appearance of muscle and sinew. It was not one of Hinkle's men. Pete Rankin had never before seen the stranger. He rode close, took Rankin's gun, reached for Nadean's Colt.

CHAPTER V

Trail Mates

THERE was a startled gasp from Nadean. One hand darted to her throat in a half-doubtful gesture. "Oh," she said, her voice a mixture of surprised certainty. "You!"

The tall man bent quickly toward her. The dusk was not too dark but that he could discern her features. He leaned back, lowered his gun, put it away. He did not take her Colt. He returned Rankin's gun.

"Hello, Nadean," he said quietly. "Thought you were two uh Hinkle's men. This the sheriff? They told me in town—" the suggestion of amusement came into the man's voice—"about you bringin' the sheriff out here."

Rankin bristled in quick resentment, remembering the way Nadean had tripped him flat in town. He didn't like to be laughed at about it, especially by a stranger.

"Yeah? Jist who are you, Mister?" quickly demanded Pete.

It was Nadean who answered. She gave a quick, amused little chuckle. "Across the border he's a big shot known as Jim Hardwick. Over here—"

"Hardwick, the revolution leader!" Pete Rankin would have been no more surprised had Baldy Pass suddenly started walking.

"Was," stated the tall man. "The revolution ended yesterday. We had a little shindig with the government troops yesterday. My Mexes liked to parade an' brag. Bullets was another matter. They ain't no more uprising. In town, I heard about you two. I decided to come on out an' have a little talk with Hinkle."

Pete Rankin pulled his gun, poked it into the tall man's ribs. His voice was crisp. "You're under arrest, Hardwick. As an accessory. Without you, Hinkle would have had no market fer his rustled beef. I'm takin' you in."

But the other did not raise his hands. He laughed, ignored the gun in his ribs. "Sure, Rankin. Directly. First we have Hinkle to take care of. Remember?"

Pete Rankin hesitated. It suddenly was fact. For a hundred yards to the east, a point rider came around a trail bend, rode toward them through the gloom of dusky dark. Behind came the stolen herd. Back of the cattle, men's quick voices urged the herd on, hurried to get them through the pass.

"We'll settle this later," said Pete Rankin. "I'll take your gun to make sure you don't try to git the drop on me an' git away."

The other's voice was suddenly hard. "Nothin' doin', Rankin. I told you I came here to see Hinkle. After that you kin have me, my gun, er anything else. But I'm keepin' this smokepole until then."

"It's all right, Pete," said Nadean swiftly. "I'll promise that."

Pete Rankin started to argue. But he was prevented. The point rider, not thirty yards away, caught sight of their blurred forms there at the side of the trail. Suspicious, he reined over to have a better look.

Pete's big roan, restless at the nearness of the rumbling, hurrying activity of the herd, stamped impatiently, tossed its head. Bridle chains rattled. The point rider cursed, jerked up his Winchester. Flame blasted into the shadows. A hot slug knifed along Pete's shoulder. His Colt leaped up to answer. But Nadean charged in, grabbed his arm, stopped him.

"Don't! The others will hear your Colt, turn and run. Rush him, capture him."

Pete and the tall man spurred their mounts toward the Hinkle gunman. When Pete rushed the man, he tried to whip his rifle around, to cut the sheriff down. But Pete swept in close, fended off the leveling Winchester with one hand, struck hard and true with his Colt. It landed solidly on the man's temple. He sagged, almost fell from the saddle. The tall ex-revolution leader got there in time to catch him, jerk him off, drag him back out of the trail.

There were shouts, curses, cries of surprise from the men driving the herd. It was too much for the cattle. The darkness, the sudden flare of gunfire in their faces, the noise and bustle of horses and people at the pass mouth, and the shouts from behind. With a rush, Hinkle's rustled herd stampeded, swept down on the pass.

PETE RANKIN drew his Colt, aimed it overhead, started to fire, to try and stop the rushing, surging cattle, at least to turn them back. For once through the pass, into those western mountains or across the Rio Grande, they would be forever lost to their rightful owners.

But Jim Hardwick caught his arm, pulled him out of the pass trail, kept him from firing.

"Let them go. There's a couple uh my men over at the foothills of the west mountains. I had 'em wait there in case I missed seein' Hinkle an' tellin' him his beef market was shot plumb to hell by the Mex government bullets. They'll turn the herd back, er at least up into Nadean's valley. Save yore lead. Hinkle's got a couple uh waddies with him back there an' they've all got rifles, Nadean says."

The beef herd swept past, pounded into Baldy Pass, on out toward the west. Behind, came three perspiring, cursing riders. Winchesters ready, reins tied around saddle horns. Spread apart, disregarding the fleeing, fear-crazed herd. Searching the trail shadows, trying to solve the reason for that single Winchester shot from their point rider.

"Charlie—" it was Hinkle— "what the hell's wrong? Where are yuh?"

The trio came on. Thirty, twenty, ten yards away. Then even with the waiting, watching trio at the pass.

Peter Rankin spurred his mount slightly, moved nearer to Nadean and the ex-revolution leader.

"Here he is, Hinkle," Pete called.

"With us. Drop your rifles, and raise your hands. We've got you surroun—"

With a hoarse oath, Jeff Hinkle spun. His Winchester leveled. Flame speared the darkness. Cursing, his two riders whipped to action. Bullets flailed the trail side, as Hinkle and his two men pumped rifle levers.

Nadean Harvey flinched as a hot slug seared her body, just under the left armpit. Her little pony danced in fright and from the pain of a bullet burn. But the big Colt in Nadean's hand raised its voice, blended with the Winchester chorus.

One of Hinkle's riders shrieked as her lead tore into his face, smashed him out of the saddle. Pete Rankin and tall Jim Hardwick were firing, yelling at her, ordering her to get out of danger. But it was like wine to her. The stench of powder, the confusion of voices, the deafening loudness of bursting cartridges. Nadean recklessly laughed and burned powder. Another man was down, threshing in the brush, dying, his chest pierced by a bullet from Sheriff Pete's hot Colt.

But that man was not Hinkle. The rustler leader suddenly crouched, dug his spurs hard into the flanks of his quivering horse. The animal lunged in frenzy, sped into the pass mouth. Pete Rankin started after him, but Jim Hardwick whipped from the shadows, in front of the young sheriff.

"He's mine, Rankin," said Hardwick in a quick, cold voice, "mine, fer drillin' Uncle Tom. You stay here."

It was suddenly quiet in the pass. Out in the valley, the sounds of two fleeing horses, the more distant rumble of a tired, spent herd slowing up, about ready to stop. Then, with sudden blunt brittleness, shots. A Winchester, twice. A Colt once. Once more, quietness.

"Uncle Tom?" muttered Pete Rankin, puzzled.

Nadean rode close. Their wounds were minor. They went almost unnoticed.

"Yes," she said quietly. "That's why Hinkle never rustled our beef. He knew Jim would recognize our brand. At least, that's the way Dad and I figured, and it looks like we were right."

Pete Rankin said nothing. From out in the valley, a rider was coming. Hinkle wouldn't have come back.

"He's my cousin," said Nadean swiftly. "He's been a little wild, Pete. But he promised he'd come over here and settle down and help with the work as soon as his—job over there ran out. They hired him to lead them, Pete, just like they'd hire a man to ramrod a trail herd. He just taught them a little marksmanship, a little drilling. You can't arrest him for what he did over there."

When Pete remained silent she went on hurriedly, defensively, but with a trace of anxiety in her voice. "He didn't buy the beef that Hinkle rustled. They bought it. The revolutionists. They paid for it. He didn't—"

JIM HARDWICK, the son of old Tom Harvey's sister, rode through the pass. He came to them slowly. He stopped on the other side of Rankin, slowly pulled his gun. He held it to the young sheriff, butt first. Pete Rankin didn't move, didn't speak for a moment.

"Put up yore gun," he said at length. "I don't like rustlin', but I reckon you've showed tonight which side of the law you're on when it comes to a showdown. Besides," he hesitated, then went on determinedly, "you'll have to take care of the ranch fer Nadean."

"Oh, will he?" Nadean gave a cool little laugh. The anxiety she had felt for her cousin fled. Pete was facing her, looking at her, a mixture of defiance and despair in his face and manner. Understanding, Nadean bent her head to hide the happy little smile that came to her lips, the gayness that was in her eyes. And when she spoke,

her voice sounded as if she had a chip on her shoulder. "Just why will he have to care for the ranch? What, Mister Sheriff, do you think I'll be doing? Where do you think I'll be?"

At that moment, with a grin, Jim Hardwick wisely decided to holster his gun and ride quietly out of hearing distance.

"Aw, gosh, Nadean," said Sheriff Pete glumly. "I'm gettin' tired waitin' an' livin' by myself in our house. You know I love you. Jim kin take care of yore ranch an' help yore dad when he comes back. Why won't you marry me?"

Nadean bent closer, smiled up at him. The chip wasn't on her shoulder any longer. He suddenly realized it never had been, that she had been teasing him.

'All right," she said simply. "When?"

It was too sudden. For six months, he'd been trying to get that answer. Now, coming like a bolt from a blue sky, it left Pete stunned, gasping, unable to think or move.

"I thought," said Nadean demurely, "you said you loved me. Did I misunderstand, or do you prove things like love by sitting as if you were a stone im—"

She never finished. For with savage possessiveness, yet infinite gentleness, Pete Rankin reached for her, held her close. Their horses were wise, range-bred and trained animals. They didn't move.

And as Nadean raised her soft, responsive lips to his embrace, she knew she'd never lack proof of his love. She snuggled against him and was happy with the promise of a bright, affectionate future with her Pete—her man.

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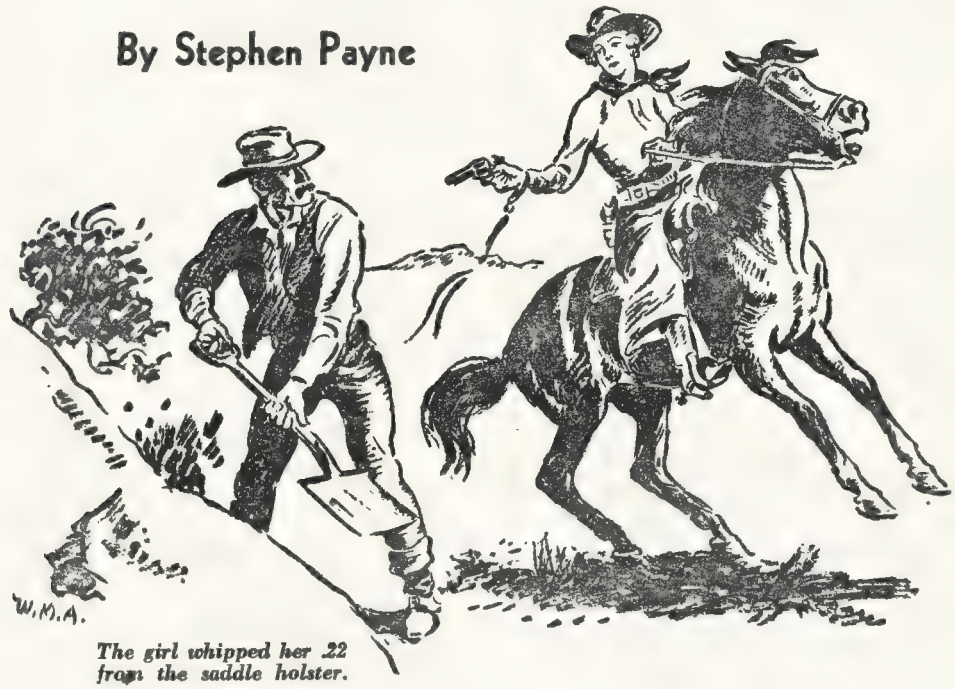


The girl whipped her .22 from the saddle holster.

Where there's a dead man's will, there's trouble. And Gypsy Blaine knew this. For a vengeance-ridden relative was trying to hogtie her heritage. Yet Gypsy learned that two heads were better than one, when two hearts were trapped on a mystery mesa.

"HOLD on, Gypsy, have you heard about the fire?"

Although Gypsy Blaine had not seen Tip Mayfield dashing after her across the sagebrush flat, she was only too glad to hear his shout. But, as the young rancher brought his steaming mount to a halt beside her bay pony, the serious expression on his usually cheerful face gave the girl of the Zigzag M a strange premonition of disaster.

"What fire? Where?" she demanded anxiously.

"County Courthouse burned to the ground, night afore last," Tip stated with grim brevity. "All the records destroyed, which means—"

"Which means," finished the girl, aghast, "that we three—mother, little Joe and I—haven't one thing to prove the Zigzag M is ours!"

Tip put his hand comfortingly on hers. "Don't feel that all hope is lost, sweetheart. Even if the record of that deed of your grandfather's is lost in the fire, you'll surely find the original. Have you come across it yet?"

"Not yet." There was a note of despair in the sweet voice. "And un-

less we do find it—that deed which gave the Zigzag M to us—we'll be paupers, we three. We've *got* to find it!"

Tip Mayfield slid an arm around the slender shoulders of the girl he loved more deeply every time he saw her. His lips brushed her brown cheek.

"Marry me, sweet, and we won't care whether or not the deed's ever found. I can take care of you and your mother and Joey."

But Gypsy shook her head, and said, more to herself than to her companion: "There's something awfully queer about that fire! It happened night before last, you say? If Chick Blaine hadn't been at our ranch that very evening, threatening us, I'd swear he fired the courthouse himself."

Tip's irregular, sunburned features betrayed his perturbation. Pulling off his floppy hat, he let the wind blow through his thick blond hair, and remarked as he had remarked a dozen times before:

"And Chick won't believe there was a deed! He ain't man enough to give up his claims to the Zigzag M. He doesn't even need it, since he's got that big ranch of his own your grandfather gave him when he was twenty-one."

"You know Chick," replied Gypsy with a brief, rather bitter smile. "He'd not be satisfied with a dozen ranches or a million dollars. And he especially wants what belongs to us."

WITH his gaze resting caressingly on the girl's brunette loveliness, Tip said: "It beats me that Chick, your father's brother, hates all of you so much. He's not much like your father, is he, Gypsy? Or your grandfather either?"

"Not like either of them—except in appearance perhaps. Mother always says she never understood how a child could hold such hatred as he has always had for her, and for anyone who liked her or belonged to her. Though Chick was only twelve when mother came to the Zigzag M as a bride, he considered her an interloper, and he hated her from the beginning. Nothing she could ever do was able to win him over. He even grew to hate dad. After he got his own ranch he never came near us until dad died, five years ago."

She brushed her hand quickly across her suddenly wet eyes.

"Maybe he still loved your grandfather," Tip suggested uncertainly.

"He didn't!" The girl's denial was vehement. "Ever since dad's death he'd been trying to bully grandfather into willing him the Zigzag M. But he hadn't any luck. Just the same, grandfather finally began to be afraid of him. So he had this deed made, because 'Deeds go on record,' he said when he showed it to mother and me. 'And wills have been broken when someone as evil as Chick wants what others have.' But that once is the only time we saw it. We've not been able to find it since grandfather died."

"And you won't marry me unless you do find it?" Tip spoke reproachfully. "Of course our two ranches would be splendid if they were thrown together, but we could manage very well with mine alone."

Unwilling to go again into that much disputed question, Gypsy changed the subject. "I must hurry on to the tank-house. Something's the matter so the water isn't flowing through the pipes as it should."

"I'd go with you, Gypsy," the young ranchman spoke regretfully, "if I wasn't on my way to the high country to look after my cattle. I hate to have you work so hard."

Gypsy gave him an affectionate glance. "I know, dear. But we each have our work, you know." She raised her bridle hand as a signal to her pony. And calling "Goodby," she loped to the right.

Here a sandy trail twisted out of sight behind sand hills, which, as if tossed up from ocean depths, skirted higher, timbered hills. These in turn

reached up to blue-green mountains capped by hoary, jagged peaks.

Without noticing the glory with which late June flooded the peaceful world, Gypsy rode on behind the sand hills, glowing in the noonday sun like hummocks of gold. Finally she found herself behind the largest of the sand hills. This one she had always called "Hill of Gold," pretending the golden sands were real gold.

Grandfather had loved to ride up here among these hills, and it was a strange feeling that he was now riding here which had aroused her. So strongly did the idea possess her that she almost believed she would meet him in a minute, just around another curve, his broad hat pushed back on his silvery head, holding his skittish big roan with a firm, unyielding hand.

If only she might meet him! Ask him about the strangely missing deed and tell him of all the discouragement and despair she was so valiantly fighting. But without interruption her pony plodded on through the heavy sand. Hill of Gold was now behind her, and no grandfather rode to meet her!

WHEN Grandfather Blaine had acquired the Zig-zag M, the waters from the wooded mountains above the sand hills had run unchecked to lower country. Swollen by snows and rains of spring they had cut deep into the soil to make a gorge known as Sand Hill Canyon.

But with passage of years, the waters down the canyon began to fail before summer and autumn were over, so old Blaine built a tank-house high on the edge of the benchland which rose back of the sand hills. This impounded water in spring, and insured a supply for that later time when there was very little run-off. From there he buried pipes along the banks of the gorge, and by this simple gravity system brought water into his house, barns and corrals. Splendid water, cold and pure and refreshing.

"If only," thought Gypsy to herself, as she fastened her pony in a clump of aspens, and prepared to climb the steep flight of steps which led to the tank-house, "there weren't times like this when something goes wrong with one of the valves or something! This afternoon I should be hunting for that deed, while mother and Joey are gone to town to get supplies."

At the top of the steps she paused for breath. Even her elastic youth felt the length and steepness of the "Golden Stairs," as she had called them the first time she had climbed them, with grandfather close behind to catch her if she stumbled. Grandfather had chuckled, "Better call 'em 'The Devil's Slide,' Gypsy, for if any poor devil ever got started down 'em, he'd think he was rolling to hell."

From the vantage point of the small platform at the top, Gypsy could see, through the trees and brush which wooded the slope, much of the twisting path behind the sand hills. Beyond them, were the Zigzag M and its neighbor ranch, Tip's Quarter Circle T.

The shadows of late afternoon were slanting across meadows, hills and sagebrush. Gypsy, having made sure that everything about the water system was in order, wearily started for home. As she again approached the "Hill of Gold" there came once more that same queer feeling of her grandfather's being close by. Then her horse rounded the turn, and at sight of a man digging into the base of the great sand hill, her heart stood still.

But it was her grandfather's evil younger son who straightened at the sound of creaking saddle leather. His dark face alight with triumph, he waved something at the girl and shouted,

"Too bad *you* didn't find this paper, stuck in the wallboard back of dad's bed! I knowed I'd find it if I just got a chance to hunt at the Zigzag M while no one was round to bother me. And I did!"

Gypsy's eyes—those dark eyes which characterized all the Blaines, but were wide and honest in contrast with her uncle's narrow, glittering orbs—dilated with alarm. When they had all left the ranch this afternoon, they had never thought of such a catastrophe as this!

Then her intent glance fell on the paper Chick was waving at her.

"That's not the deed!" she said fiercely. "And the deed couldn't have been hidden in the wall. It's so big we could have seen it."

"No, this ain't the deed," agreed the other. "But it tells where-at 'tis. It says in dad's writing to 'Dig into the base of Hill of Gold fifty feet from the bent pine. The deed'll be in a coffee can buried there.' I've 'most got to it, I reckon."

With a swift dip of her right hand the girl whipped her .22 from her saddle holster.

"Drop that paper, Chick Blaine, before I shoot!"

Startled, the man's hand flashed to his side as he reached for his gun. But he had evidently neglected to strap it on and the fact that he was weaponless plainly nonplused him.

At another sharp order from the girl, accompanied by a shot which whistled uncomfortably close, Chick dropped the paper. He ran toward his horse, ground-hitched fifty yards away. In order to make sure of her enemy's complete rout, Gypsy sent a second bullet whining through the quiet air to pierce the crown of Chick's hat. The fellow spurred away in frantic flight.

SPRINGING from her horse, Gypsy seized the shovel her enemy had dropped and began to dig farther into the excavation already begun. To her relief and thankfulness she did not dig long before her spade struck against something metallic. The next spadeful brought to light the coffee can!

The girl was prying off the cover of the can when sound of someone riding up behind her whirled her around, her heart sick with fear that Chick had returned to surprise her. But at the sight of Tip Mayfield's lean, muscular six feet of splendid youth, happiness and relief flooded her tense nerves.

"Look, Tip!" she cried joyously. "Here's the deed! The deed which gives us the Zigzag M. Grandfather was so afraid something would happen to it that he hid it here in Hill of Gold. But if I'd been half an hour later Chick would have had it—and we'd have nothing."

"That's the best news I ever heard," rejoiced Tip. He leaped from his horse and drew Gypsy into his arms, where she rested contentedly for a few moments.

"I mustn't stay here any longer, Tip," she said at last, freeing herself from his loving embrace. "I must hurry home and tell mother, so she will stop worrying. She's almost sick over the whole trouble."

"All right," agreed Tip, with a last caress. "I'll go with you. It must've been Chick I saw whippin' his horse down the leg, burnin' up the earth in the direction of the Zigzag M. I was 'bout half a mile from the three yellow pines when I saw him, but didn't think nothin' of it then."

"Oh, hurry!" cried the girl, again harassed by nameless fear. "That man might do anything! He's made the most terrible threats."

The early twilight of a long summer evening was drawing its soft mystery over hills and mountains and plains. The pastel tints of hazy, drifting clouds tinged the air. Each sound of nature seemed the soft sighing of content. But the tumult in the minds of the racing riders shut them away from this beauty and tranquility. Though urged to their best speed, it seemed to Gypsy that the horses merely jogged; seemed as if the mile and a half to Zigzag M were trebled.

Before the rambling log ranch house the man and girl reined their lathered, gasping ponies to a skidding

turn. They sprang to the ground before the animals had really stopped. In spite of the apparently peaceful appearance of the ranch, Gypsy felt a premonition of tragedy even before she caught the sound of heartbroken sobs.

With Tip close behind, Gypsy sped into the dark living room. There was her mother, huddled in a chair, her slight, worn figure wracked by convulsive weeping.

"Mother! Mother!" implored Gypsy. "What is the matter?"

Mrs. Blaine's voice was choked and broken. "Joey's gone! I've called and called, and walked all around the buildings, but he hasn't answered. His pony's gone, too. A while ago, when I came back from driving in the young turkeys—they'd gone into the meadow, so I was longer than I'd expected—Joey was gone then."

"Have you heard any noise?" Tip asked quickly. "Seen anything to make you think something was wrong?"

"While I was still across the creek, I thought I heard horses. But I s'posed 'twas you and Gypsy."

"Where was Joey when you left?"

"He'd helped me carry in the things from town, and then he'd taken his bean-shooter and gone out by the barn to 'practice shooting Indians', he said. But why would he have gone away without telling me?" the frightened mother choked.

"You heard horses?" Gypsy repeated, while she stroked her mother's forehead. "Oh, Tip, it wasn't so long ago you saw Chick Blaine dashing toward the Zigzag M. Do you suppose—"

"Come with me," commanded Tip, grim-eyed.

ONLY a minute later, Gypsy and Tip were following fresh horse tracks along the road which led to Chick Blaine's Cross Bar ranch. But because by now the fragrant darkness of the summer night covered the land, Tip was obliged to dismount and light matches to make sure the tracks were still leading onward.

After a long silence, Gypsy put into words the problem she had been pondering. "Queer for Joey to leave the ranch. He knows how easily mother worries, and he's the best little kid about looking out for her. You don't think, Tip, that Chick could have—taken Joey—to get us to—" Her voice trailed off into a short sob.

"Of course not," asserted Tip stoutly. He was glad the darkness hid his face, or the girl would have seen that the same doubts beset him. "It would be the craziest thing in the world for Chick to kidnap Joey. He'd never dare be seen in this part of the world again—or any part of it, for that matter. Couldn't it be that Joey, excited by his game, started on a chase after his 'Indians,' and maybe got lost?"

"Perhaps," agreed Gypsy. "Well, the deed's safe, anyhow. And since I forgot to tell mother we'd found it, she couldn't tell Chick about it if he were to make another visit. Maybe he just planned to get us off the place so he could steal the real document."

Tip was again lighting matches and peering at the ground. Straightening, he said abruptly: "The tracks leave the road here and cross the creek."

"Hurry!" cried the girl, spurring her pony through the shallow stream. "We'll find Joey over there at Thunder Butte."

But Gypsy's high hopes of finding the little boy faded into disheartening disappointment when the weary riders came upon two grazing horses, saddleless and bridleless.

"Why, it's your gray team!" exclaimed Tip, quietly approaching the animals. "Shouldn't they be—"

"They should be in the corral! I should have noticed they were gone. But in the excitement of everything else, I didn't really look at the corral."

"It looks like they were run along

this road recent, and then scooted 'cross the creek, just a-purpose to lead us out of the way. P'rhaps Chick *was* hopin' to get us away from the place, like you just said."

Suddenly hot tears filled Gypsy's eyes. She winked them bravely back as she asked in a voice she tried to keep steady: "There's not a sign of a pony's having been with the team?"

"Not a sign. And Joey's too small to have ridden one of these big horses bareback. You'd best go back to your mother while I—"

"If you're going to call on Chick Blaine you can't leave me behind!"

"That-a-girl!" approved Tip, and drew Gypsy to him for a brief, sweet moment. Then he was up in the saddle and they were riding fast.

The Cross Bar seemed strangely silent. But at the stable the two found Tebb Watson, Chick's hired man, sullen and unfriendly as Gypsy had always remembered him. He merely grunted in answer to Tip's greeting, saying: "Chick's gone to Rockvale. What you want to search the place for?"

Gypsy explained nervously, while Tip watched with keen eyes the face of the hired man. "What time did Chick get home?" asked the girl, after she had told her story.

"He ain't come home 's evenin'. But I know he was a-goin' to town. Shucks, he ain't done nothin' to the kid!"

A search through house and buildings convinced Gypsy and Tip that Tebb might be telling the truth. At least Joey was not on this ranch.

"Possibly Joey's gone home by now," comforted Tip, when he and Gypsy were again on the road. "At any rate we'll see, before—" he broke off.

"Before what?" asked Gypsy. "You might as well confess you're at your wits' end, the same as I am, and don't know what to do."

However, it seemed the young rancher had a definite idea of doing something yet this night. For after the two had reached the Zigzag M and found Joey had not returned, he held Gypsy's cold hands for a moment. He begged her to get some rest and comfort her mother, and then left her and struck out air-line for Rockvale.

"I'll get the sheriff on the job," Tip had snapped. "And if I see Chick Blaine—" He had left the rest to inference.

In Rockvale Tip heard that Chick had indeed been there earlier this same evening. 'Had some business deal on with a stranger," he was told. "We s'posed he went home after that."

Sheriff Wilson was absent. So Tip, without disclosing to the townfolks his dilemma, had to be content with leaving a message for the lawman.

After this the young rancher, more deeply worried than he'd ever known he could be, spent the rest of the night in combing the hills and gulches in the immediate vicinity of the Zigzag M. His search was, however, fruitless.

But when at sunup he found himself close to his own ranch, he decided to ride into it. There he stayed his appetite with a feed of hot coffee, boiled eggs and flapjacks. He changed horses, and then once again was speeding swiftly, purposefully, to the Cross Bar.

Here again Tip was disappointed. Chick Blaine was not at his ranch and the sullen Tebb disclosed he did not know where Chick had "rid off to."

"Yes, he was here for a little while las' night," Tebb admitted. "You should ha' come then."

Tip glanced at the fellow, and rode away to the Zigzag M to see Gypsy and talk matters over. However, when he arrived at the Zigzag M he did not find the girl there.

AT daybreak of this same morning, Gypsy, who had not closed her eyes the whole night long, got up from her tumbled bed and went out of the house. Immediately she caught

sight of a horse standing near the corral gate.

"It's Joey's pony!" she cried, racing across the yard as swiftly as an antelope.

It was indeed Joey's pony, saddled, its bridle reins broken. Stark fear clutched at Gypsy's heart. "Does this mean Joey's *dead?*" she whispered in a voice which sounded strange in her own ears. "I mustn't let mother know the pony's come home without Joey."

Quickly she led the horse into the stable. Then sudden hope lifted her crushed spirits. She could back-trail the pony! She threw her arms about the shaggy little animal's neck. "If only horses could talk! But since you can't you've done the next best thing, Chubby."

With this, she ran to get her own saddle to put on her own horse. Only a moment later she was flying toward the house, face chalky, breath coming in hard gasps, holding a folded paper in her shaking hand.

"Mother," she cried, bursting into the room where Mrs. Blaine was sitting in disconsolate inactivity, "I found this in the stable! Tied on the horn of my saddle. It's from Chick and says: 'Come through with the deed by noon today or you may never see the kid. Put it back where you found it, in the can in the sand hill. *By noon.*'"

"He's got Joey?" Mrs. Blaine began to shake, her body torn by tearless sobbing. But Gypsy, dashing into the room where she had put the precious deed, asserted with an assurance she did not feel:

"He won't hurt Joey. I'll fool him too, by putting another paper in the can. While he's looking at it, I'll get our boy. Don't worry, mother. This time I'll get the best of Chick Blaine."

All the time Gypsy raced along the road to the turn at the three yellow pines, she was planning how to best her enemy. Of course there was no need now of attempting to back-track Joey's pony, which must, she reasoned, have broken its bridle and thus gotten away from Chick. With no particular plan in mind, she reached Hill of Gold, seized the spade which lay exactly where she had dropped it yesterday, and began to dig.

"Drop that spade and raise 'em high, girl!"

At these words behind her, Gypsy whirled. Ten feet away stood Chick, a Colt pointed unwaveringly at her. Seeing that there was no mercy in the dark face which reflected the blackness of the man's hatred, the girl did as ordered. Deftly Chick appropriated Gypsy's gun holstered at her side, then snatched up the coffee can from the ground.

But this gloating changed to wild fury when he discovered that the paper in it was not the coveted deed.

"Holdin' out on me, eh?" he rasped. "Well, I'll get it yet—for your mother and Mayfield'll pay anythin' to get you and the kid! I'll make Mayfield mortgage his ranch to the hilt, too. I sold my Cross Bar last night. To the same feller I can sell the Zigzag M before neighbors get wise to what's goin' on here. 'Course I'll have to drift. But with the dough your beau'll dig up, and that from the sale of a couple of ranches I'll be sittin' pretty."

"You won't get the deed to our ranch," flared Gypsy, stung to wild anger by the man's words. "And don't think you'll get by with keeping Joey, either. We'll have the sheriff on his trail by night," she added with sudden inspiration.

"Ha-ha!" snorted Chick. "Say, I never knowed the kid was gone till Tebb tol' me 'bout you and Mayfield huntin' for him. That gave me the idea of leavin' a note for you. I dunno where he is. But it was good bait for my trap, pretendin' I did."

Absolutely nonplused, Gypsy tried to speak, but only a choked gasp escaped her white lips.

"Now I've got a nice little prison for you, girl, till I get the deed an'

money," Chick went on. "March! Right up the steps to the tank-house. You can't get outta that, nor make no one hear you, neither."

IF only she could kick the gun out of that unwavering hand, thought Gypsy, plodding up the steps. But Chick kept too far behind for her to touch him, and she feared he would shoot if she refused to go on. Then too he might find the deed, which she had pinned inside her shirt. She would not surrender that—yet.

As Chick lifted the heavy beam and swung open the door to the tank-house, a boyish shout greeted Gypsy. Joey hurled himself into her arms. Chick, as completely astonished as the girl, almost dropped his gun.

"Well, if things ain't breakin' for me better'n I thunk!" he exclaimed. "How'd you happen to be here, kid?"

Defiantly the boy answered, while he clung to his sister, "I followed you here last night, when you came to monkey with our water pipes. I got locked in, sis, and I'm 'most starved. Let's go home. I don't like it here."

"No, you don't go anywhere!" snarled Chick, roughly pushing the boy and his sister inside the tank-house with a burly arm. "I got other plans. You followed me? How come? Huh? Maybe I got the idea." He scowled blackly at the boy.

"This ornery li'l brat was playin' with his bean-shooter when I rid into the Zigzag M yest'day evenin'," Chick addressed Gypsy. "Wanted another look in your house, I did, an' Joey seemed to be alone. But when I started to go in he sassed me—shot a few of his beans at me, too. I gave him a belt 'alongside the head and went on 'bout what I'd come for."

Joey flared, "I wished I'd had a gun, so I could have shot him!"

"Didn't find nothin' in the house," Chick smiled mirthlessly. "But I seen your team in the corral and I turned 'em out so's to cause you some trouble. Chased 'em along the road for a spell before I turned off myself, headin' on for town. . . . But where was you, kid?"

"You forgot how you was mutterin' awful mad, when you come outta the house," said Joey. "I could hear you mutterin' you was goin' to shut off our water at the big tank."

Chick's snaky eyes opened wide in surprise. "What? You heard me?" he ejaculated.

"Yes. So then I got my pony and rode after you a little way. When I saw I couldn't bring back our team and it was 'most dark I went on ridin' up along behind the sand hills. I was goin' to stop you from monkeyin' with things at the tank-house."

"How could you have stopped him, Joey?" cried Gypsy.

The boy shook his head. "I tied my horse good, climbed the steps up here, got inside and then the door swung shut. But I wasn't scairt, sis! I found some old things we use to cover the pipes when it's cold, and slept on 'em. Let's go home, Gypsy, I'm awful hungry."

"Nope!" snapped Chick savagely. "The two of you's stayin' right here until I get Tip Mayfield's—"

"Tip Mayfield's *what?*" interrupted Tip himself, from beside Chick. The young rancher had evidently come along a path from behind the tank-house, for had he climbed the steps he would have been seen. "Gypsy, are you—"

"Until I get Tip Mayfield's *gun*, fust off!" snarled Chick. With lightning swiftness, he took advantage of Tip's momentary glance at the girl and Joey to knock the gun from the young rancher's hand.

IN the convulsive grasp with which her little brother had been holding to her, Gypsy had until now been only partially aware of something hard pressing against her arm. Now, terrified at the grave danger threatening Tip, she felt this something hurting her. She reached down and drew from Joey's shirt pocket his

most precious possession, his bean-shooter.

An inspiration born of fear and despair flashed through her brain. "Is it loaded, Joey?" she whispered.

"Plumb full. I've been keepin' it full until I got a chance to fire at—"

But Gypsy was not listening to her little brother, for not far away she heard Chick's menacing command.

"Move back near them stairs, fellow, or I'll shoot you down like—"

Quickly Gypsy put the bean-shooter to her lips. A second later a sudden, stinging shower pelted against Chick Blaine's neck and ears. With a snarl of rage, the man pivoted to receive another battery of swift, bulletlike missiles full in his face and eyes. Blinded, he involuntarily threw up his arms to cover his face, and in that moment Tip snatched the fellow's gun and threw it into the brush.

Each was a wary fighter, quick and active as a mountain lion. But Chick, who was heavier, was by reason of superior weight pushing Tip dangerously close to the small platform at the top of the flight of steps.

"Two more beans, Gypsy," said Joey in a shaky voice. "Here." He pressed them into his sister's hands.

Two beans, the only thing which might save Tip! Moving as close as she dared to the combatants, Gypsy took careful aim, and shot one of the hard missiles full into Chick's eye. He stumbled, and Gypsy, suddenly weak and dizzy from the horror of all that had been happening, dimly saw Tip swoop forward. He seized Chick and hurled him over his head down the steps.

Thump-thump! It was the sound of a body hurtling down that steep flight, hitting and passing projections at the turns without slowing. Then came smothered yells of terror, growing fainter as Chick Blaine drew nearer the bottom of the steps.

Tip's arms were around Gypsy. She rested against him, listening to his broken phrases of thanksgiving. Joey who had darted past his sister to peer downward from the top of the steps, shouted joyfully.

"Sounds like big ol' Sheriff Wilson, a-grabbin' Chick down there!"

Tip and the girl joined Joey.

"Just the best sort of luck to have you come tumblin' into my arms this-away, Chick Blaine," came the unmistakable and pleased voice of the sheriff of Rockvale. "Your pal in Rockvale's come through with a confession how he fired the courthouse, 'cause you paid him to!

"But if Tip Blaine hadn't rid plumb to Rockvale to tell me 'bout how things was out here, I mightn't ha' stopped by the Zigzag M 's morning'. Mrs. Blaine told me she b'lieved Joey maybe was hid up thar in the tank-house, or we might not ha' found you so easy, you lousy skunk."

Gypsy's eyes sought Tip's. "I don't understand yet how you happened to come here, Tip," she said. "And how did mother guess where Joey was?"

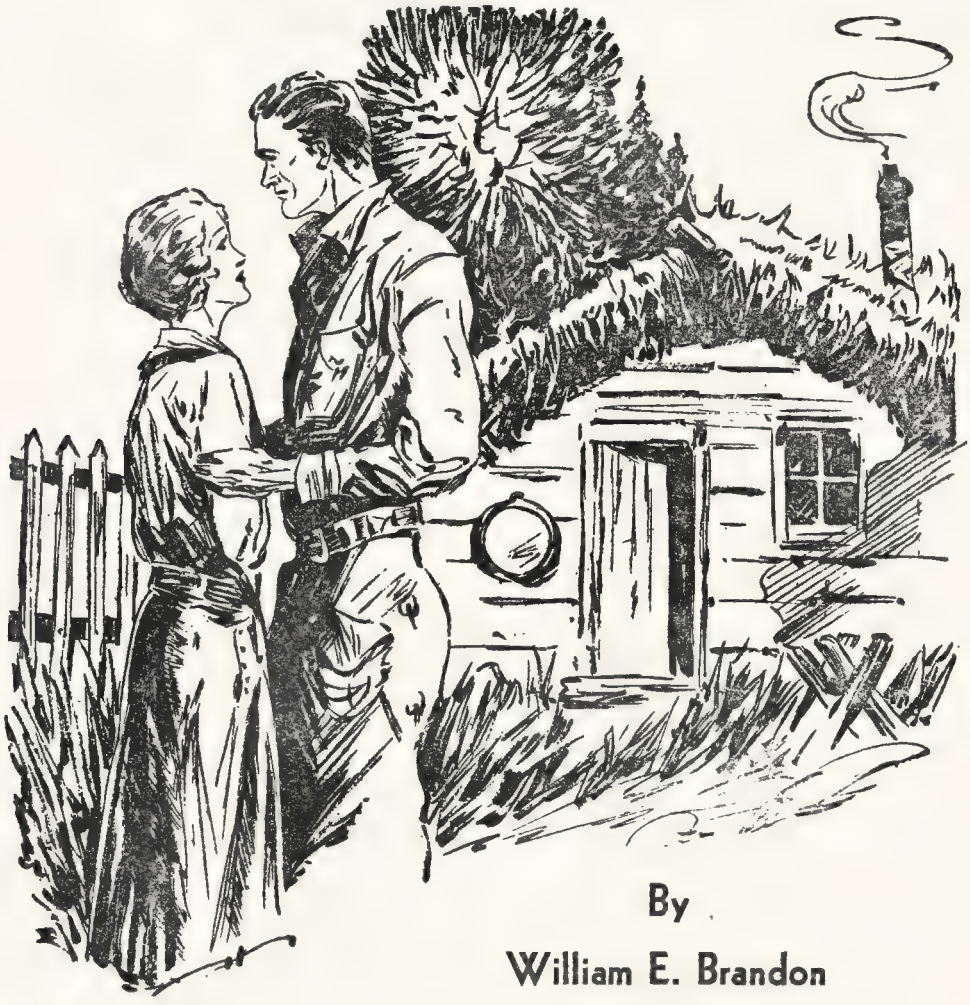
Tip smiled proudly at the little boy who was still eagerly watching the scene below. "That kid's got a head, and he uses it, too. When I got back to your place a while ago I wanted a drink powerful bad. But the water came out of the faucet just in a trickle. So I got a wrench, took it off —and there were *beans* stopping the pipe! So we guessed somehow Joey was here. Just luck I came up the other side of the hill, or Chick might've seen me."

"But the funny thing is, Chick didn't know till just now that Joey was here. He was putting me in here, and there was Joey. But, oh, Tip, you were so wonderful to get us out of our trouble! Even if the beans did help."

Tip pressed a hard kiss on Gypsy's sweet lips. "The sand hills kept their secret a long while, my darling, but we learned it in time. *Now* we're goin' to put that deed on record and then get married before there's a chance for anything more to happen. Though I really believe luck's turned our way at last."

Pretty Nora Bane bucked relentless range law to prevent the man she loved from wearing . . . .

The Badge of Dishonor



By

William E. Brandon

NORA BANE met him at the main corner in town, beside Rammer's Saddlery. For an instant she looked at him, while the corners of her eyes crinkled in the fashion he remembered, and then:

"Hi, cowboy, you're back."

He pulled off his hat. "Howdy, Nora." He had the same careless, widening grin, but his eyes were not smiling with it. They were sobered, understanding, not wild and unthinking, as she remembered them. "Yes, I'm back."

"Well—" She almost choked on the word, for some reason, and swiftly lowered her eyes. It'll excite some people. Good—good luck!"

"Nora." He reached and took her arm as she turned. "Girl, you're glad to see me?"

Tears dimmed her eyes then, and for an instant she clung to his hand. "Oh, Sandy—so much. But please don't stay. Please don't! They won't give you a chance!"

"Forget it." He was holding her wrists, standing close to her. Nora was conscious of someone across the street, watching them. But she didn't look to see who it was. It didn't matter anyway. The news of Jack Sands' return would spread soon enough.

"Some folks wanted me back," he went on.

She bit her lip to keep her voice steady. "I needed you, Sandy. We all did—and Dad especially. But it's useless. Oh, you don't know! You haven't a chance. It's horrible—"

He released her wrists, dropped his hands to his belt. "Can't keep you off of it, can I? Street's no place for it, Nora. An' it's droppin' a wide loop to say things are so bad a man ain't got a chance." He grinned again briefly, looked up and down the dusty street. Late afternoon sun was blazing on the one-story frame buildings. There was little life in the town.

Nora lifted her head. "I'll be going, Sandy. Please come out, as soon as you can." She turned again to say: "After three years, I hoped it wouldn't be like this."

She heard him answering: "Neither did I—and I'll be comin' out when I can."

Nora Bane knew the meaning of those last three words. The knowledge hovered over her, stayed with her, like some black, giant, silent buzzard. The knowledge that had caused their meeting to be such a strange mixture of intimacy and formality and casualness—and fear.

She had just seen Jack Sands, for the first time in three years. Nora had thought of that moment, waited for it, in a way had lived for it—and now it had come and passed. She had seen him, and she was hopelessly praying that he would leave again, at once.

Nora clenched her hands to keep back other tears, stumbled a little as she walked. Someone bumped her gently. She looked up, rubbed a knuckle across one long-lashed blue eye.

"Oh—" her voice trembled again—"Dad—Dad, Sandy's home. He came."

She couldn't see her father clearly, but she could feel his arm fall about her shoulders.

He said, with a little huskiness in his tones: "That's tough. The damned fool wouldn't stay away." He cleared his throat, tightened the arm about her shoulder in a quick gesture, let it fall.

They walked together down the street, toward the livery stable. One of the springs on their buckboard had flattened while they were coming into town. They had taken it to the smitty, next door the stable, to be fixed. Both of them were silent, until Nora finally spoke:

"Dad, isn't there anything we can do? It only seemed crazy while the sheriff was blaming you for a killing. I wasn't so scared, then. He's not as powerful as you are. He couldn't railroad you, Dad. But Sandy—he hasn't anything to fight with except himself. You know the sheriff won't give him a chance, and old Judge Barker isn't interested in anything except whisky. He'll be so drunk he won't know whether he's in court or at the round-up dance.

"And Sandy's honest—he won't lie. Dad, he won't have a single chance!" She caught her father's arm with an abrupt show of fierceness. "I've waited three years for that crazy cowhand to come back, and I'm not going to lose him just when he gets here!"

"Quiet up then, we're still in town." He looked down at her and laughed shortly. "You remind me of the time when you was little, and was called old Dan's little hellcat. You never changed. One minute you're a spring

breeze, an' the next you're flashin' like a pan of black powder."

"There's reason to," she said slowly. "And I'm thinking of something that will flash brighter yet." She stopped him. Her eyes were shining. "Listen. . . ."

JARVIS RAND, sheriff of Tuckahoe County, started across the street toward Rammer's Saddlery. He'd been standing by the wooden awning in front of the Silver Dollar for some time, had seen the meeting between Jack Sands and Nora Bane. His close-set black eyes had narrowed, watching that. Now Nora and her father had disappeared inside the smitty's, down the street. And Jack Sands was still standing by the Saddlery, rolling a smoke.

The sheriff stopped ten feet from him. His lips curled in a half sneer below the thin black mustache, barely moved as he said: "Sands, I reckon you see me."

Jack Sands looked up in apparent surprise. Gray eyes beneath the wide hat brim glinted, humor showing through the hardness. "Always a surprisin' man, sheriff," he drawled. "Been standin' there long?"

Rand's hand was on the .45 at his belt. "Save your chatter, Sands. You comin' peaceful, or do we shoot it out?"

For an instant unreasonable anger swept through Jack Sands. The sheriff was goading him, he knew that. And he knew that if he would draw he would kill the lawman. And Rand, too, knew that. But it would not get what Sands had come home for—and that they both knew. The sheriff was in the saddle, and was taking all his ride.

Jack Sands said: "You've got me clean scared, sheriff. I figure I better come peaceful."

Rand came the last ten feet with swift, catlike steps, jerked Jack Sands' gun from its leather, reached up with his other hand to catch the tall rider's shoulder, whirled him around.

"Then get movin'!"

Jack's reserve cracked. He lashed up his left hand, caught the sheriff's wrist, jerked it and sent Rand rolling a dozen feet in the dust.

He was after him, on him, before Rand could recover his balance to shoot. Sands slammed one hand around the cylinder of the sheriff's six-gun, making it useless, and brought the other around to the man's face, hard. The blow cracked like a bull whip. Rand, mouthing curses, was silenced. His head jarred back, and he sagged.

Across the street, by the Silver Dollar, someone laughed. And Jack Sands' anger subsided. Humiliation to a man like Rand was worse than a bullet in the belly. Whatever slight chance Jack had had before would be gone now. The sheriff would try every trick in his book against him.

"Anyhow," said Sands, thinking of that, "I'll hang happier than otherwise." He wrapped one hand in Rand's shirt collar, booted him along before him. "Which way's the jail, sheriff?"

Rand snarled in unseeing rage: "I'll get a trial before tomorrow, you damn jasper. I'll see you hanging at another sunset. An' I'll save a special seat for that damn proud filly of yours—"

Sands jerked the shirt collar tighter, shut off the sheriff's wind, moved him along toward the jail. The sheriff would have a special seat for Nora at his hanging. Hell for a man to be hogtied by sense. Without that, he could close his hand on the skunk's throat so near it, twist out the rotten life. They entered the 'dobe jail, and Sands slammed shut the door behind them.

THE courtroom was in the back end of Judge Barker's General Store. It was hot, dry, dusty, and crowded. Judge Barker sat before a large packing case, a claw hammer in

his hand to serve as gavel, a bottle of rye whisky beside him.

Sheriff Rand had gotten the jury together within four hours. Twelve men—ten of whom were men over whom Rand held power, as he did over most in Tuckahoe County.

Nora Bane sat with her father near one window, and beside them was Barl Conners, the town's blacksmith. Barl had worked as smitty on old Andy Bane's YZ spread for fifteen years before coming to town. He was one man in Tuckahoe who didn't take orders from Sheriff Jarvis Rand, and, as he often roared, never would.

Jack Sands sat alone, a dozen feet away, near Judge Barker's bench. The judge took a pull from his bottle, wiped his lips.

"Sheriff," he said wheezingly, "come forward an' take the stand."

Rand stepped up. The judge swore him in, coughed apologetically, took another drink, and commenced. There was no county prosecutor in Tuckahoe.

"Sheriff, tell this here court about Asa Watkins gettin' killed."

Rand let his eyes rove over the courtroom. They fastened on Nora's blue ones. "About three years ago," he said slowly, "I found Andy Bane's buckboard out on Four Mile Flat. Asa Watkins was layin' dead in it. He'd been shot through the head."

"I see," said Judge Barker, hoarsely ponderous. "Then what'd you find out?"

"I figured, like ever'one else in the county, that maybe Asa'd got drunk an' shot himself. At first, I figured that. Then I started thinkin'."

Someone in the back of the room guffawed, and the judge broke out a board in the packing case with his hammer. Rand went on: "I knew there was bad blood between Asa and Andy Bane's outfit—the YZ. An' Asa was found in Andy's wagon. An'—" he paused here for effect—"it was about that same day that Jack Sands lit a shuck outa here for parts unknown. Fact is, I think he was gone before I found Asa's body. An' Jack Sands had been workin' for the YZ for some years.

"It's took me the most of the last three years to get a case of it, judge. But I got proof to offer now that Asa was shot, at close range, square between the eyes. An' he wasn't killed at Four Mile Flat. I've got it figured, an' can near prove, that he was killed eight or ten miles from there, an' the horses just pulled the wagon that far before they stopped. An' it's just about eight miles from there to the YZ.

"By which any man can see it's likely Asa was killed on the YZ. Now I knowed Asa good myself. I know he was tryin' to talk reason to Andy Bane instead of fightin' him—"

Nora's father reared out of his chair. "That's a damn lie, Rand."

Judge Barker smashed the packing case again, caused the whisky bottle to wobble dangerously, and forgot everything else grabbing for it. He steadied it, looked around owlishly from behind his glasses.

"Proceed," he said. "Set down, Andy."

"An' I got witnesses," said the sheriff, "that Asa went to the YZ the evening before I found him dead, to see Andy Bane. Two men went with him, but they didn't stay. What happened was Andy an' Jack Sands started bulldozin' Asa. He jumped in their wagon to try to get away an' one or the other of 'em shot an' killed him. An' that's all, judge."

Judge Barker broke in on the mumble of voices which arose in the room. "It took you three years to figure that out, sheriff?" He held the bottle poised for a drink as the sheriff answered:

"Took a good while to think it out, an' then some time to get my witnesses together. I had an airtight case three, four months ago, judge, but Jack Sands wasn't here. So instead of spendin' the county's money chasin' him, I threatened to arrest Andy Bane for the killin'. One or other of 'em

done it, but I figured Sands more likely than Andy. I told Andy unless Sands come back to give himself up I'd see he hung for the crime." His lips twisted. "An' Sands bein' sweet on Andy's daughter, soon's he heard about it, he come back."

Nora felt her cheeks reddening. Barl Conners leaned over to say: "If no one else steps on that scorpion, I'm sure as fire aimin' to."

Andy Bane stood up again. "All right, judge, if the sheriff's done talkin' it's my turn."

Judge Barker took the drink he'd been holding. And then he said: "Set down again, Andy. This here court's bein' run in a orderly manner. Next witness—uh—"

Nora walked over toward the witness stand. "I'll be the next witness, Judge Barker, if it's all right—" She smiled at him.

THE judge began to beam through his whisky fumes. "Dang it, Nora, anything you're fixin' to do's all right with this court. Here." He held out his Bible waveringly. "You solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, an' nothin' but the truth—"

She took the stand. It took courage in a girl to say to that room, crowded with cattlemen, neighbors, and their wives, what she was going to say but Nora Bane had that courage.

"I want to start with the last thing the sheriff said, judge. That it was because of me Jack Sands came back. Jack Sands left here three years ago to go up in Montana, and build up a little outfit his uncle had willed to him up there. When he had it ready, he was coming back for me. It's ready now—and that's why he came back. He was starting back here before he knew anything of this—this murder charge."

There was no sound in the courtroom. Nora had spoken with her eyes lowered. But she looked up now. Her dark blue eyes flashed as she said: "And I want to say to the court that about two years ago Sheriff Rand asked me to marry him. I told him I would not. He insisted, and Dad threw him off our place. I thought then and I think now, judge, that Jarvis Rand is a yellow, despicable coward, who would stop at nothing to gain what he wants." Rand's face was glowing sharply beneath the tan on it.

The girl continued: "He said then he would make us sorry for what we had done. This is the way he's trying. But it isn't the only reason he's brought this murder case up. There was a man killed, and no one knew why, or knew who had done it. A lot of folks in this county want such crime stopped. The sheriff has been forced to do something about it."

Tension was growing in the room. This was open show of war between Andy Bane and Sheriff Rand's far superior power. But no one interrupted Nora as she went on:

"The sheriff says there was bad blood between Asa Watkins and Dad's outfit. The sheriff should know. He was Asa's partner, but he didn't mention that. And every fair-minded man in this courtroom knows that Asa Watkins was little better than a common rustler. He was the kind of man this county is well rid of.

"The sheriff says, judge, that he knows Asa came over to our place the night before he was killed. He says two men came with Asa. He should know that too, judge, because the sheriff was one of the two men. But he didn't mention that. They came up to the place in the evening, and Asa was drunk. They came to argue about some water rights in the southwest corner of our land. Dad and some of the boys made them get off the place when he saw Asa was too drunk to talk. Jack Sands was in one of the bunkhouses packing his roll. He was going to leave the next morning for Montana.

"Later in the night someone tried to fire our feed barn. Dad and Jack went out after them, scared away

their horses. So whoever it was jumped in our buckboard. It was standing hitched in the yard, and got away.

"That's the story Jack Sands will tell you, Judge Barker, and it's true. And he'll admit that both he and Dad shot at the men getting away in our buckboard. But you see Jack hasn't any proof that they tried to set fire to the barn, or stole the wagon. It's our word that Asa might have been shot as a trespasser, and the sheriff's that he might have been shot while a guest at our place—while there talking to Dad. It's enough—or nearly enough—for the sheriff to get Jack convicted." For the first time her voice wavered.

"But Asa might have shot himself accidentally. We could hear him shouting as he left—and he was shooting back. He might have killed himself." Nora's tones were now insistent—pathetically, somehow, and uselessly. "He was crazy when he was drunk, and everyone knows he had tried to kill himself before. Once, when I was little, I saw him try to shoot himself while he was in front of this store right here. When he was drunk he thought about suicide. And we all knew that.

"And as for Jack leaving—he rode away the next morning before we heard of them finding Asa's body. Dad started out that morning looking for the buckboard. Neither one thought Asa might be dead. And the sheriff found the buckboard before Dad did. And—and I expect Sheriff Rand will be able to furnish witnesses who will swear they saw Jack Sands shoot and kill Asa Watkins, on that night."

"You're damn right I've got witnesses, lady," Rand snarled. "I've got witnesses that'll swear they saw Sands here drill Asa between the eyes. And they'll keep on swearin' it till hell freezes over!"

JUDGE BARKER was busy with another drink. He took the bottle away from his mouth, blew loudly, and said: "Just a minute, sheriff. I'm slightly confused. Now Sands was shootin' at Asa. That right?"

The sheriff nodded, and added viciously: "An' killed him. I'll bring a witness for you, by blazes. I'll bring the other man that was with Asa. An' he'll hang that murderin' Jack Sands higher'n a buzzard!"

"But," said Judge Barker gently, very softly, as though the liquor had burned his throat, "Sands was standing in the yard, say. And Asa an' whoever was with him was gettin' away in the wagon. At night, in the dark. Mighty good shootin', sheriff."

"Jack Sands can shoot the eye out of a fly at forty rods. An' be standin' in the middle of a barrel of pitch when he does it!"

"But, sheriff, Asa was shot at close range. You said so. Right close range."

For an instant the sheriff didn't speak. And then, as words started out in a swift torrent, Nora's voice cut over them:

"Judge Barker, the sheriff and Asa Watkins were partners, and I think—" her blue eyes, on the judge, were very innocent—"I think it was very fortunate for the sheriff that Asa was killed. I never thought before, Judge Barker, but the sheriff must have come into all of Asa's property, since Asa had no family. And there was a lot of property, wasn't there? Sheriff Rand has become a pretty powerful man in the county since then—"

Rand's voice, distorted with anger, broke in: "Are you tryin' to make it look like I might have had somethin' to do with Asa's killin'? Goin' that far to try an' save this Jack Sands' life, are you?"

Judge Barker said, still gently: "I'm right surprised at you, sheriff. You ain't upholdin' the dignity of the law. Just who was this witness that was with Asa when he was shot?"

Rand didn't answer. He was standing before the judge, thinking, calculating. He was trying to catch up

with the swift move which had knocked down his case, turned a direct insinuation toward him.

Judge Barker pursued his thought: "It couldn't have been you, sheriff?"

Barl Conners' bull-like voice blasted the tenseness left by the judge's remark. "Your honor," he shouted, "it's about time I come forward with somethin' about this case." He strode to the center of the room, near the sheriff. He held a wrinkled slip of paper in his huge right hand. "Yesterday I fixed a flat spring in the Banes' buckboard. That's the same wagon Asa was found dead in. An' down between the floor boards I found this here note. I saved it for today, for when it should come in useful."

The judge seemed very much interested. "Go ahead—read it."

Barl read in a heavy, flat voice:

I'm thinkin' about what a no good coyote I am. In about a minute I'm puttin' a bullet in my head. I hope this here old world feels better afterward. I sure will.

And Barl boomed out: "It's signed Asa Watkins."

SOMEONE stamped on the floor and shouted. For an instant there was confusion in the courtroom. The judge quieted it, said:

"You found that between the floor boards in that wagon, heh? Then it must of fell down there when Asa shot himself, an' it's been layin' there for three years." The judge shook his head, took another shot of his rye. "Strange is the ways of—" He brought himself up with a question to the sheriff: "But what about this witness, sheriff?"

Rand straightened, laughed shortly, and with something, strangely, of relief in it. "I was the witness, all right, judge. I jumped out of the wagon a mile or so away from Bane's. It just *seemed* to me like Asa might have been hit back there, but I can sure see now he wasn't. He went on a little ways, wrote that note an' then killed himself. So I offer my apologies to all these I've had in court. I only tried to do my duty as I seen it."

"Um," said Judge Barker, waving his bottle slowly back and forth below his nose.

"An' so," said the sheriff, "I reckon we might as well shut up an' all go home. If the rest of the folks in this county'll forget my mistake, I'll sure forget I ever made it."

"Um," said the judge again. "That's mighty kind of you, sheriff. After the way you was so certain young Sands killed him, an'—so forth." He pushed the bottle away sadly. "So Asa was alive when you left him? If he'd been hit between the eyes you'd surely have known it."

"Sure I'd have known it. I admit I was wrong. Sands is free, far's I'm concerned. What're we waitin' on?"

"Only to clear up an interestin' fact," said the judge as if in apology. "You was the last one with Asa before he died. You had a good bit to gain by him dyin'. Um—"

"Damn it, doesn't that note say he killed himself?"

"Yeah, that note's mighty valuable. It's got you to tellin' a lot of things you might otherwise not have been so free with, sheriff."

"You dirty double-crosser, if you try to pin that killin' on me— The note's there, isn't it? What more proof you askin' for?"

Judge Barker shook his head in slow reproof. "Sheriff, as well's you knew Asa Watkins, you must've known he couldn't write a line—"

Jack Sands left his chair like a springing panther, dove for the crouching sheriff. His hand smashed into the sheriff's gun arm as Rand's .44 roared. The bullet shattered the whisky bottle, passed within an inch of Judge Barker.

Sands wrenched the six-gun from the sheriff's hand. He fell back as Rand kneed him, twisted away, whirled, in the act of drawing a second gun from his belt.

The two shots blended, ripping

apart the echoes of the first. Nora Bane cried out: "Sandy!" She left her place and ran toward him. He was sagging over like a man hanging onto a railing.

Judge Barker reached him before she did, held him up, searched with a practiced, suddenly sobered hand, for the wound. "Shucks," he said, "it no more'n busted a rib."

Barl Conners broke in: "More damage than that to the sheriff, Sandy, m'boy. He's dead as Asa Watkins."

Jack Sands, coming to from the shock of the bullet, looked into Nora's face. He was grinning again now, carelessly, and his eyes were smiling with it.

"You little minx. You done it all yourself. Why'd you tell a man he didn't have a chance?"

She forgot the crowded, confused courtroom, came close to him, took his hands. "I only wrote that note, Sandy, and gave it to Barl. I thought we'd use it to get you free with. But I thought about it all night, and by today I was ready for us to try and get Sheriff Rand with it. Thinking it over, Sandy, I was sure Rand must have killed him. I don't know why it didn't occur to any of us before. We were all too willing to believe you or Dad must have hit him there by the house. Now we know the sheriff saw his chance that night to get everything himself and took it."

Jack nodded weakly. He turned to the judge. "For a drunken man," he said, "you thought right straight."

Judge Barker's rheumy eyes held a far-away look. "The first day," he said, "that I've been cold sober in ten years. Little Nora here told me this mornin' that's all she wanted, was me sober. Figured I could do that much for such a fine girl, anyhow."

Nora laughed softly, happily.

Jack said: "Sober? After sittin' there killin' the best of a quart of rye?"

Judge Barker wiped his mouth. "No, son, but that's sure what I'll be doin' in the next hour or so. That bottle was to keep the sheriff happy. He wanted me drunker'n a hoot-owl for this trial. So I drunk an' drunk an' drunk. An' drunk! In fact, I ain't drunk so much dad-blamed water since I was pupped. Um. The taste of which it'll take a lot of the genuine to wash away."

Nora looked up at Jack Sands. She was smiling, but her dark eyes were wet again with tears, as on the morning before. "So now, Sandy, you're coming out—when you can?"

He forgot the pain of his shattered rib as he drew her close to him. "Now, girl," he said, "an' for good."

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Trigger Troubadour

Two men loved Iris Starlin—a trail man and a badge-toter. With one of them happiness beckoned. But the other tried to break that happiness when he called for a trigger tryst.

The last cartridge in the sheriff's gun exploded.

By Eric Thane

DUST flung into the cloud-patched sky told of a trail herd on the prairie south of Trailway. Iris Starlin's heart leaped to such thunder that she seemed seared through and through by the flame of it. Dave Lane rode with those steers—Dave Lane, tall and lean and brown, whose rich baritone voice had thrilled her with its song. He had promised six months ago that he'd love her. That in his dreams he'd see nobody but her, and that he'd come back to her.

With fingers excitedly fumbling she saddled the little pinto which had been the last gift of her father before he'd passed away, a year back. Down east of Trailway there was a coulee choked with roses. Dave had promised to meet Iris there when he returned. No roses when he'd made that promise, only the bare bushes. But now those bushes were gloriously blooming, a riot of pink that brought tears to her eyes, and a storm of perfume that smoked all through her. Dave would meet her there. Dave—her heart shouted the word over and over.

"Goin' out to meet the singing trail man, I reckon!"

Iris stiffened. The big man who

spoke had come up behind her silently, like a trailing cougar. Suddenly Iris felt a little like a stalked animal. She swung to face his somber, hard look.

"Yes! I am!" she snapped defiantly.

"Still in love with that good-for-nothin', eh?"

Iris shook to the accusing lash of his tone. She cried out, "Dave's wild, I know, but he's not a good-for-nothing. And I won't have you saying that, Sam Martel! Oh, he's wild, but so are all the trail boys—"

Marshal Martel's hard eyes lidded close in a squint which Iris had come to know indicated determination. He said harshly: "He's not better or worse than the rest of the boys, sure, an' I'm treatin' him accordingly! Trail men are poison to me—all of them—an' you know that! Trailway's a peaceable town long's the herds stay away, but the minute a bunch of Texas boys blow into town with their trail herd, the place is a hell-hole! Wal, Trailway ain't standin' that any more! We're gettin' civilized, here in Trailway."

One hard hand dropped to the gun at his hip, and for the first time Iris noted that the leather thongs dangling from the holster were lashed about his thigh. Instinctively, she put the fingers of one slender, brown hand up to her throat, as golden and smooth-skinned as the fingers. Apprehension stabbed through her. When there was peace, big Sam Martel wandered through Trailway with his gun slapping slackly against his leg. But when trouble loomed he stalked like an avenger. Colt huddled hard against his trousers as if eager for the grip of the lawman's palm.

"Reckon the trail herds are peterin' out!" the marshal of Trailway said. "An' for me, I'd just as soon this was the last one! Every time them Texas rannies blow in, there's shootin'. Last time a couple of citizens of Trailway were killed! Wal, it ain't goin' to happen again!"

"You—you can't blame them for celebrating!" Iris managed to gasp. "Sam, those boys have come five hundred miles without sight of a town—"

"Sure! Only they're too wild to keep their celebratin' inside reasonable limits. An' especially Dave Lane. Wal, we've jugged them boys an' made them pay fines, but this time it's goin' to be different. They're toein' the mark, every last man of them. An' if they don't—wal, the mayor says I'm to consider that as bein' direct against the law. Against me!"

HIS hand slapped against his gun. Then real fear surged through Iris. The menace in his voice! And his squint eyes were coldly, murderously blue. No bluff in them. He anticipated a killing before the herd left Trailway, and he seemed eager for it. Iris felt as if frost had needled deep into her throat.

"You mean—"

"Just this, Iris! Dave Lane shot a man last time he was here. It was just pure luck he didn't kill him. Wal, if he aims to raise hell, he'd better think again. Because if he starts paintin' the town red, I'm meetin' him, man to man! An' that goes for any of the trail rannies!"

"But especially for Dave Lane! Well, I'll see he doesn't get into trouble, marshal! I'll see to that—and that will disappoint you, won't it?"

He didn't deny the accusation, but stared at her with such steadfastness that she dropped her defiant eyes. Then Martel's voice softened to the tone of a man who has been hurt badly.

"Why not?" he asked, almost defensively. "Dave Lane took from me the only thing I ever loved. You! And you couldn't resist that trigger troubadour. Until he drifted along, I figured you an' me were settled for life. Then Dave comes along an' cuts in on me—"

"Sam, please!" Iris cried. "I've told you before I—I can't help loving him! It's just—the way it is. Besides, I never promised to marry you."

"Reckon not. But I loved you. Still do, Iris!"

"And for that you'll kill Dave!"

Martel shrugged his grizzly shoulders, and the old, harsh lash came back into his voice. "I'm upholdin' the law of Trailway. Just that, Iris. But if Dave bucks it—wal, I reckon he'll be bedded down for eternity right here in the dust of Main Street!"

Iris flared to anger. "Can't you leave him alone? He's got enough trouble, with Hoop Gillian and that outfit of cutthroats after him. He upheld the law, putting Hoop into prison, and you should thank him for that. You ought to try to get Hoop, now that he's broke prison, instead of picking on Dave. Dave did a lot for the law when he stumbled on evidence that put Hoop behind bars. You don't think Dave can do anything but sing."

"Hoop didn't stay there long, an' neither did Trick an' Evaro. But don't worry about them. I'll take care of them if they're driftin' this way!"

He added, "An' if you figure maybe I'm layin' for Dave Lane, forget it. I'm a lawman!"

"I'm glad you said that, Sam. Dave won't give you any trouble."

Martel, his huge shoulders stiff, stalked away. He'd play the game honorably—that was his reputation. Iris breathed in relief. The marshal of Trailway might wish, more than anything else, that Dave Lane would break the law. But until then the Texas man would be permitted to go his way without interference.

"And I'll get Dave to promise he won't buck Sam!" Iris said to herself.

Then she forgot Martel in the thrill of anticipation. She rode hard for the rendezvous in the coulee of roses, the swift clop of the pinto's hoofs keeping pace with her heart. Would Dave be changed? Half a year of time wasn't long, but the trail was hard and men changed rapidly on it. Dave would give up the trail after they were married.

"Dave! Dave!" she said aloud, over and over.

Then she heard a deep baritone voice resounding along the trail. A horseman forced his way down through the roses, and Iris saw at once that he hadn't changed at all. Still tall and lean and brown, with a caressing slowness in his voice, and a devil-look-out quality in his flashing eyes. He pressed her so hard against him that she cried out in laughing protest.

He swung his look directly into her eyes, and she thrilled. "Iris, I want you to marry me right away! This is my last trail herd. We'll settle down somewhere, a long ways away—"

Iris glimpsed the shadow in his eyes, and said softly: "You're thinking of Hoop Gillian, aren't you?"

"Yes. Hoop broke prison down south, an' he's out to get me for puttin' him behind bars. Last I heard he was layin' along the trail. Him an' them hell hounds of his, Trick an' Evaro."

"Dave, you—you've got to stay away from them! They're three of the hardest killers in the west. You wouldn't stand a chance with them."

"Reckon not!" He added furiously: "At that, I'd take the chance, just to show them I'm not scared of them—"

"Dave, you can't do that! They'd —kill you! You—Dave, I'll marry you. Tomorrow. And then we'll go some place, over the mountains, where Gillian can't find you. Sooner or later he'll stop lead, or get back in the pen, and then we can come back."

"Tomorrow you'll marry me?"

His slow voice surged in exultation. And again his arms crushed her until she ached.

"I said that, Dave—and I mean it. I love you!"

He backed off a little, to survey her with a flashing look. "You're sure pretty," he broke out. "Them blue eyes of yours an'—an' everythin'. You don't make much of an armful, but

what there is, is plenty. An'—I'm goin' to marry you!"

He swung back to his horse, and said: "I got to get back to the herd. I'm tophand now. See you tonight."

INSTANTLY there flashed into Iris' mind the memory of grim Sam Martel and his gun strapped to his thigh, and with throat tensing she said: "Dave, I want you to promise me something. Don't celebrate. Don't go near those saloons and layouts where the rest of the boys go at all. I —I've got a special reason for asking this."

"Me marryin' you tomorrow, an' not celebratin'?" Then he laughed in the slow caress of sound that shook her always. "Sure. Why not? You just ask an' I'll obey!"

"You've stopped being a wild Texas rider now, Dave. You're going to settle down."

"Reckon I have been wild in my day —but not no more, Iris. I'm settlin' down."

Iris breathed in relief. She'd anticipated a protest. Not that she would have blamed Dave. The trail was long and hard and rough, and town meant a break in the monotony of it. And Dave, who kept promises, had given his word the last trip through that he'd settle matters with certain individuals and certain gambling games when he returned again.

But he would behave. Iris was certain of that. Dave didn't give his promises as a bluff. Dave would keep straight. And Sam Martel would play the game. But he would nevertheless hope in vain for the opportunity to unleash his gun on Dave Lane.

Iris dropped down upon a rock to dream. The wind up on the prairie did not swirl down here into the coulee. And the scent of the roses, like an invisible fog of perfume, was not disturbed. Iris breathed deeply. This was happiness, pure and complete, she thought. Dave loved her—she loved Dave—tomorrow they'd be married. She planned happily. Dave would leave his job, and together they'd ride far away, where there would be no fear of Hoop Gillian. They would love each other everlastingly, without break or lessening of it.

"Dave!" Iris said aloud.

She broke off a rose and thrust it into a buttonhole of her white blouse. Time passed, and she dreamed on. The pinto whickered impatiently, but when the mistress refused to arouse, it dropped its head forward and slept standing. The sun had swung down in the sky to mid-afternoon before Iris roused. There was much to do before tomorrow. Before she married Dave Lane. She must be getting back to Trailway.

She'd see Dave tonight. How many hours until then? She laughed a little at herself for her impatience. There was a lifetime with Dave coming, she thought. What did a few hours without him matter now?

A quarter of a mile south of Trailway, the Texas herd was grazing. Most of the boys were probably in town by now, Iris thought, and Sam Martel, eyes narrow, would be watching them. Watching for Dave Lane to make a break. But Dave would not be there. He'd be at the herd, thinking of tomorrow. And thinking of the girl who was to be his wife. Loving her. Iris thrilled.

Then she glimpsed a man riding to intercept her, and for some reason she chilled. She pulled up to wait for him. It was Hawley, one of Martel's deputies. His face was somber and his eyes, Iris thought, pitying.

"Got some tough news for you, Iris. I don't like to tell you, but I figure you better know."

"Yes?" A band seemed to tighten about the girl's throat. Instinctively she knew the deputy's news had to do with Dave. Dave!

"It's about Lane. He was picked up in the Last Chance Saloon about a half hour ago, fightin'! Drunk as an owl an'—an'—"

"Yes!" Iris panted. "Go on!"

Hawley seemed to hesitate, then

rushed on, as if he had a bad task he wanted over with as soon as possible. "He was talkin' about you, Iris. Tellin' all the boys how he'd made you fall in love with him. He didn't say anythin' much complimentary about you, Iris. I—I reckoned you ought to know, so I rode out to tell you."

He jerked his bronc about and rode off swiftly. It was apparent that he was glad to have a bad task over with. Iris watched him go, with dazed eyes. It didn't seem possible—Dave drunk and fighting, when he'd promised her not to celebrate. And talking about her, boasting that he'd made her fall in love with him!

She didn't feel the horse move under her, and the motions of it as it headed for town. The prairie spun about her viciously. Dave had broken his word—and Dave had boasted of her love, making of it a common thing, no better than that given by the dance hall girls. He didn't love her! That fact shocked through her like a physical blow, leaving her limp. Tears misted across her eyes, and all inside her she seemed dead.

"Dave! Dave!" she whispered, as she'd whispered before. Only this time the word was a wisp of hopeless sound and not of happiness.

D a v e—who had betrayed her! Tears were flowing freely now, and her throat was so tight she could not swallow. She felt as if someone had beaten her physically with a club all over her body. She didn't feel the motions of the saddle until the horse came to a stop, and then she realized that she was in Trailway.

A man, slow-voiced in a manner that branded him as being from Texas and one of the trail boys, was talkin' to another. Words clashed upon Iris' consciousness.

"An' then this Marshal Martel says: 'We've had enough of you, Lane, an' I'm takin' steps to see that we don't have no more.' Then—"

Iris jerked. She called out: "You —you're talking about Dave Lane? Where is he?"

"Wal, ma'am, figurin' correctly, I reckon right now he's bein' bedded down for eternity. Him an' Marshal Martel rode out north, the marshal sayin' he was escortin' Lane out of town. But we all knowed what it meant. There's goin' to be an accident. You know! He'll try to resist Martel, an' that'll be all—"

"And I'm glad of it! He deserves to die!" Iris snapped.

SHE wheeled the pinto and galloped furiously down the street. Once, she'd have gone to her father, and he would have comforted her. But no more could he speak words which could sooth the turmoil in her. She went into the silent house and up to her room. She wasn't crying any more. She was dry-eyed vengeance now—glad that Martel was going to kill Dave Lane.

In the mirror she glimpsed herself, and the rose in her blouse. She tore it out and crushed it under her riding boots. She'd been thinking of Dave when she'd picked that rose. She was thinking of him now. But in a different way.

"He—he didn't love me at all!" she whispered.

But there had been love in the way his arms had held her, in their fierce pressure about her, and in the slow caress of his voice. Suddenly she was afraid. She remembered his kisses—and then she didn't want him to die. Her fury suddenly diminished, and only the hopeless throb of pain all through her remained.

"He boasted of my love! But he was drunk!" she thought.

And he was wild. He'd promised not to celebrate—and that broken promise she could not forgive. He didn't love the way she did, with all her heart. His love was all on the surface.

"I—I won't marry him now!" she sobbed. "But Martel—Sam will kill him!"

She saw Lane's tall body limp in the sage, and horror overcame her.

He'd hurt her more than anything in her whole life, but she couldn't see him dead. She had loved him once—still loved him—but death, she thought, was too harsh for him.

"I won't let Sam kill him!" she said aloud.

She still loved him. That fact drilled through her. Swiftly she went down to the pinto. To stop the murder of the man she loved! She paused to secure the Colt that had been her father's, and strapped the heavy weight of it about her slender waist. There was only one way to stop Martel, and that was at the point of a gun. She'd stop him that way. If she was not too late!

North, they had said the lawman and his prisoner were riding. Iris put the pinto into a desperate race. The chances were all against her. Martel might decide to turn aside from the trail, and she would be sure to miss him.

"I—I can't miss him!" she said fiercely to herself. "I can't!"

The boom of a gun checked her, and brought her up short, quivering. Was she too late? And then she glimpsed a pair of riders ahead, one slender, the other with the shoulders of a grizzly. They were close together. Then the gun, in the hands of the thick-shouldered man, boomed again, and with a gasp of hysterical relief Iris saw a running jackrabbit was the target.

But it was ominous. Martel was simply waiting for an excuse to turn his lead and gun powder on Lane.

Iris hesitated, then made up her mind. She rode in a big circle that brought her ahead of them. Then she slipped from the horse and went to a clump of juniper, where she drew the Colt. Her heart was thundering like a storm, and it boomed until it hurt when she glimpsed Dave's face.

"Well, what you waitin' for?" he was saying, tight-throated. "I'm not going for my gun, so you'll have to find some other excuse—"

"Excuse fer what?" Martel boomed. "I'm just escortin' you out of town, Lane."

"Sure. An' everybody knows what that means!"

"You broke the law, Lane. We passed an ordinance about fightin', an' the mayor says it's up to me to enforce it. An' you got a record, Lane, that's plenty bad. Trailway's had enough of you."

"Sure there ain't any other reason for this—escortin' me out of town? Seems to me I heard that you was in love with Iris Starlin once."

"Keep your mouth shut!" Martel snapped viciously.

The pair was abreast of the juniper clump now, and Iris called out: "Stop! Both of you!" She thrust the Colt forward menacingly, lining Martel's broad chest along the sights. His mouth dropped open in amazement.

"Iris! What you doin' here?"

"Turn and ride back to town, Sam. There's not going to be any killing. And if you try to disobey me, I'll shoot you!"

SHE knew her cheeks were white, and her voice shook hysterically. Martel's somber eyes blazed at her. To avoid them she looked towards Dave, then quickly swung her look back to Martel. The flashing look of the Texas man sliced through her like a hot knife.

"Iris," Dave called, "do you know what you're doin'? Put that gun up! You're just gettin' yourself in bad by buckin' the law."

"Perhaps that's so, Dave. But Sam Martel is never going to kill you! You ride on. You've saved your skin, anyway. Ride on, I say!"

"But, Iris—"

"And you promised me that you'd stay away from the saloons. You said you loved me. And then you boasted—Oh, ride on, Dave! I never want to see you again!"

With an effort, Iris controlled her outburst. She waved the gun at Martel. The big man hadn't made a move, but into his face had come an expres-

sion that perplexed Iris. He seemed dumbfounded, more than anything else. Now his lips opened.

"You're buckin' the law, Iris."

"I know it! But I don't care! Go back to Trailway, Sam. Please; I—I don't want to shoot you—"

Dave dropped out of the saddle and took a couple of hesitant steps forward. His nearness shook Iris. She wanted to look at him, but she didn't dare. Instead, she snapped: "Get in your saddle and ride, Dave!"

"But you—I don't understand. Listen to me, Iris! I'm sorry about goin' into that saloon—"

"And sorry about boasting how you'd got me to love you! Boasting about it, before all those men!" Iris cried. Her voice broke. "Now, ride! Ride out of here!"

"Iris, I don't savvy—"

Hoofbeats sounded along the trail. Iris jerked back, heart thundering. She hadn't bargained on any interference. It would be fatal to her plan.

"Dave!" she cried. "Quick! Ride!"

A voice boomed in, harsh and cutting with a note of arrogance to it that brought Iris stiffly to attention.

"No you don't ride! Girl, drop that gun! Quick!"

Iris swung to look into a hard, b r u t a l face, knife-scarred and splotched below a straggly beard with what appeared to be permanent bruises. The man was thin as a jackpine pole—thin as his two companions. The three of them made as hard-bitten a trio as Iris had ever seen.

"Down with that gun! You heard me once!" the thin man snarled.

He made a menacing movement, and Iris dropped the Colt. A thin-lipped smile slashed his face. A smile without humor, indicative of satisfaction but nothing else.

"A-huh, Lane! Reckon we see each other again!"

The curious tensity of Dave's voice brought Iris' look around to him. His face was hard, set—and hopeless. But his tone was steady when he returned: "Reckon we do, Hoop!"

Hoop Gillian! Fear froze through Iris' veins. The man who, with his gang, Dave had sent to a penitentiary down south. The man who had sworn such terrific vengeance upon his informer that the news of it was common all along the trail. Iris stifled a scream. Everything spun about her dizzily. Then resolutely she took hold of herself, though despair laid cold fingers on her heart. The man she loved—but could never marry—would die anyway.

"Glad to see you," Dave was saying ironically. "Howdy, Trick. Howdy, Evaro. This is Marshal Martel. He was aimin' to kill me, but looks like you boys will get the first chance."

"Call off them nags, both of you!" Gillian snarled. "An' keep your hands clear of your guns!"

Iris brought her fist up to her mouth in terror. She knew from the look in Dave's eye that he was going for his gun. They'd shoot him down. And Martel's heavy shoulders were tense with the same intention. They'd shoot him down, like Dave. Then Gillian chuckled. He took a step back, so that he stood beside Iris. His eyes glittered at Dave and Martel.

"Figurin' on gunplay, eh? Wal, minute you draw, I'm pullin' the trigger of—this!"

His gun flashed against Iris' head, and she felt the cold muzzle of it boring into her ear. She saw the fear in the eyes of both Dave and Martel. And suddenly she wasn't afraid. She remained quite still while the two men dismounted and unbuckled their guns, to throw them into the juniper bush.

Gillian removed the Colt from the girl's head, and chuckled again. He indicated to Trick and Evaro to dismount, and they came tumbling eagerly out of the saddles.

"We're goin' to cut cards to see who gets a chance to pump lead in him!" the foremost of the two gloated eagerly.

"I'm takin' him myself, Evaro!"

"Aw, Hoop—" Evaro protested. His eyes glittered at Dave.

BUT Gillian paid no attention to the protest. He thumbed back the hammer of his gun decisively, and lined it at Dave's chest. His face contorted suddenly into such fury as Iris had never seen before, and he spat out: "Wal, this is the reckonin', Lane. I been after you ever since I broke out of the pen, an' now I've got you. Me an' the boys run into you down the trail a piece, but you was never alone an' we had to wait. An' today we saw you an' the marshal of Trailway ride out together. We followed. An' here we are!"

"You bear a grudge good, don't you?" Dave said quietly. "I broke up you an' your gang of cutthroats down south, an' since then all you've tried to do was even things with me."

"Sure! An' I'm evenin' things now!"

Trick's eyes swung suddenly from Dave to Martel. He seemed struck by a sudden thought, for his mouth opened in a boom of laughter which so muffled his words that Evaro cursed him into repeating them.

"Get it, boys? This is Marshal Martel, of Trailway. A lawman! What do we do with lawmen, boys?"

Evaro's face contorted. He snarled out: "Sure it's a lawman! Why didn't we think of that before? Reckon I'll take care of him!"

Iris swung her look to Martel. His face hadn't changed from its usual inscrutability, except that now the muscles along his jaws stood out in helpless fury.

"That's out!" Gillian snapped. "Martel goes back to Trailway alive. Savvy that? We ain't got any fight with the law this far north. An' we don't fight women, Trick. I'm sayin' that before you get to thinkin' about that girl. Nope, that girl an' Martel go back to Trailway without a mark on 'em. It's Lane I'm after. An' Lane I've got!"

"Aw, Hoop—" Evaro protested.

"I'm boss here. Don't forget that. An' it's just Lane I'm after!" His finger, hard against the trigger of his gun, quivered. Iris fixed her eyes on the hammer. She thought she could see it waver, ready to fall—to send death smashing into Dave Lane.

"Walk back, Lane!" Gillian snapped. "Back to that rock. An' face me! An' think about the mistake you made when you stuck your nose into my business down south!" He shook his gun. "Back!" he repeated.

Dave took a dozen steps in reverse, slowly. His last steps on earth, Iris thought. With his back against the big rock, he waited, eyes straight and hard looked into his killer's face. And a humorless smile refused to wipe itself from his lips. Then he looked swiftly at Iris, and a change came over him. He made as if to come to her, but a threat from Gillian's gun halted him. His eyes flashed at her, with a look in them she could interpret only as love.

"Iris, I—"

"Dave!" Iris jerked forward. She wanted to run to him, to put her arms about him, to tell him in this last moment that no matter what had gone before, she loved him and nothing he could do would change her love. Then Martel's heavy hand fell on her wrist, jerking her back.

"Sam! Let me go! Let them—let Gillian shoot me instead of Dave—"

"You'll just get hurt. Don't make Hoop change his mind about lettin' you go," the marshal whispered urgently.

"I don't care! If he kills Dave, I —I don't want to live, either!"

Martel tensed. He shook all over, suddenly, as from some emotion, and the quiver of his body vibrated through his arm to Iris' wrist. Then he was whispering urgently, harshly, while Iris listened with horror.

"You really love him, don't you? An' I love you. I want you to know that, Iris. But no matter now. Iris, he went into the last Chance Saloon to separate a couple of Texas boys who'd got into a fight. I saw my chance. I called him for disturbin' the peace. An' he broke down an' told

me how he'd promised you not to get into trouble. I saw my chance, Iris—a chance to change your feelin's for him. I sent Hawley out with a story I'd made up!"

"Then—he didn't boast of our love —" Iris gasped.

"He loves you plenty, Iris. An' I do, too. Forgive me for what I did, an' what I was goin' to do. I'm tryin' to make it up now."

His wrist tensed, jerked, to send her sprawling into the sage. Then he dived for the guns in the juniper clump. His big voice yelled out like a boom of vengeance.

"Stay low, Iris. Hold yourself, Lane!"

HE smashed into the clump, and frantically his hands shuttled for the guns there. Evaro swung around, and brought his gun down. It banged harshly. Powdersmoke hissed, and lead slashed away twigs close to Martel. He burrowed deeper. Trick brought his gun around, and his weapon and Evaro's, cracked together. This time only one hunk of metal cut twigs. The other found its mark.

Iris heard Martel grunt. A sound of pain and shock. But he didn't stop his burrowing. He twisted deeper into the clump, seeking the two guns there. And when he emerged there was a Colt in either fist.

And blood, much blood, streaming over the front of his shirt. He staggered. But his voice boomed as lustily as ever, and as vengefully.

"Here you go, Lane!"

He drew back one arm and flipped a gun forward. Dave caught it in mid-air. He dropped to his knees just in time to avoid lead that splattered against the rock behind him, and frantically he wriggled around the rock just in time to escape a second slug.

Iris had lifted herself to her knees, but now she flattened again. But she could still see Sam Martel, there in the open, upright yet but faltering. Blood like a red band was across the front of his shirt. And his gun was shooting without mercy.

Iris saw Dave hunch himself over the rock and open up. Gillian ducked for the shelter of a dry wash. Evaro had gone to his knees, gun blazing, but Trick was still erect. A slug had taken his hat from his head, and it lay in the grass close behind him. An instant later Martel got him. The outlaw's mouth opened like that of a fish, convulsively, and he slumped forward, tripping so that he spun around to flatten out upon his hat. He quivered for an instant, then stilled.

"One of you!" the lawman's big voice exulted. But it wasn't so big as it had been. And the red band across his chest was growing broader.

"You—I'll kill—" Evaro gasped.

His voice was labored. There was lead in him, weighing him down. It had forced him to his knees. And now the last cartridge in Martel's gun exploded. Fresh lead smashed into him. He sank forward on his face. His gun stilled for good.

"Two of you!" the lawman exulted. "Two of you, rats! Give me another gun an' I'll get you, Gillian—"

Then he seemed to freeze. Iris jerked to her knees. The big man quivered. One hand went to his throat, and across his face there swept a look of daze. He took a step forward, two of them, and then he hesitated. While Iris watched with a fearful look, he collapsed into the grass.

Then she was up and running towards him. Lead from the wash in which Gillian lay hummed by her, but she got to Sam and dropped beside him, flat against the ground. Dave was swearing hoarsely, and his gun was banging, but with care. From the corner of her eye Iris saw him leap from behind the rock, flop upon his belly and edge towards the wash.

"Dave! Be careful!" she cried.

He didn't answer, but all at once became still as a snake. Iris prayed an instant for him, then turned her attention to Martel. He was breathing heavily, in evident agony. At her

whisper, he rolled his head so that he could look at her. His voice was only a ghost of sound.

"I—I've played the game square all my life, Iris. Except for this one time. An' I—I tried to even things up. I'd have got Gillian. if I'd had lead enough—"

"You never played anything but square, Sam! Even this time. You can't always be square when you're in love, can you?"

"Iris, if you'll forgive me—"

"I've already forgiven you, Sam. Now, just lie still until Dave gets Gillian, and then we'll take you home and make you well again."

"Not this time, Iris—"

His heavy breathing stopped suddenly, and did not start again. Iris' heart surged. Dead! Big Sam Martel, who had loved her—dead. She choked back her sorrow and turned attention to the man she loved.

Lane lay in the grass, quite still. Then Gillian appeared, lifting himself carefully from the protection of the wash. He evidently didn't see Lane. And when he was shoulders and waist above the gravel protection of the side of the wash, Lane jerked upright.

"Shoot!" he yelped.

His gun flamed first, and Gillian's lead came from a gun held by a dying hand. It flew wide, far off over the prairie. Gillian gurgled a curse and dropped back into the coulee. Lane slumped back to wait. Five minutes —ten—and when there was no indication of life from the wash, he snaked forward.

"Dead!" Iris heard him ejaculate.

She roused to her feet and stood looking down at Sam Martel. Presently Dave joined her. She shook to the thrill of his strong arms around her.

He didn't say anything. He just kissed her, and then the two of them looked down at the man who had almost wrecked their happiness, only to save it. Dave didn't know the story Martel had made up about him, Iris thought. He knew that Martel had loved her, but he didn't know to what depths Martel had stooped in order to get her. Dave could respect Martel for what he'd done openly to get her, but he could never respect him for so small a thing as tale-bearing. No need for Dave to know what Martel had said.

So Iris thought. Martel—she understood. He'd been honorable all his life. The one time he had failed to be honorable was past, and Dave need not know about it. He'd remember Martel and respect him as four-square and white, fighting openly for what he wanted, in a manner Dave himself would have done.

"He died—for us!" Iris whispered.

"An' he loved you. I reckon that showed he really loved you. Like I do," Dave said, his arms crushing her in a grip from which she didn't want to escape.

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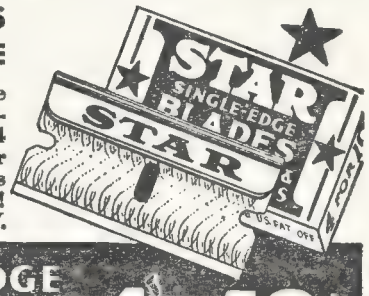


STAR SINGLE-EDGE BLADES 4 FOR 10¢

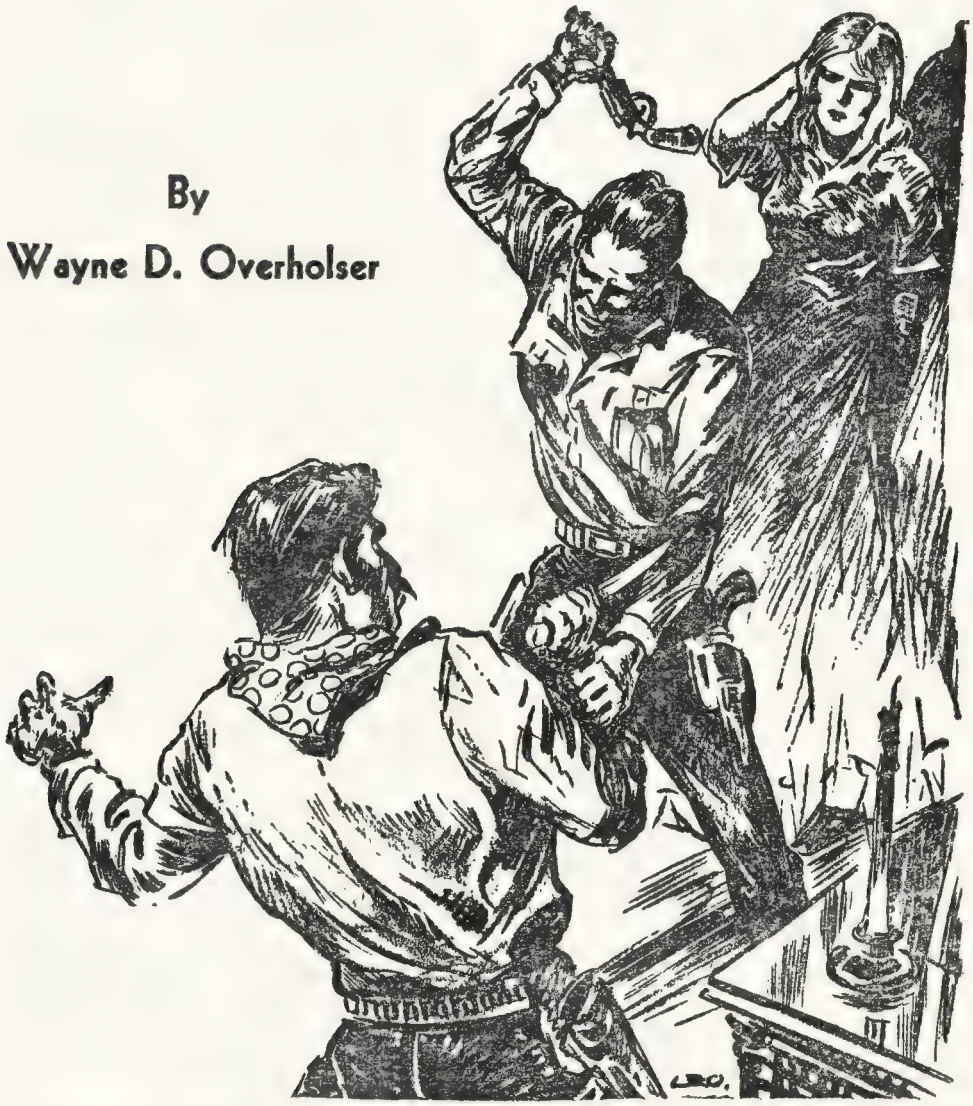
FOR GEM AND EVER-READY RAZORS

When bushwhackers back-trail, it's time to corral some . . . .

Double-Draw Magic

By

Wayne D. Overholser



CLAY RAWLINS stood looking down at the fresh earth, bareheaded. A tear trickled unnoticed down his cheek. Only one thought hammered at his dulled brain. John Dawson had been murdered, bushwhacked. He lay there under this new mound.

Clay looked up the valley. The air was still thick with the dust kicked up by the teams of people who had come to the funeral. Preacher Vale's words came back: "This man has only begun to live. His life on earth was beyond reproach, a life that shall bring its reward."

The cowboy's lips tightened. John Dawson had never harmed anyone. Why should he have been killed without even a chance for life?

Then Clay turned and strode into the house. It was a log cabin built by Dawson himself. Clay had helped cut the pines and bring them down from the mountains.

For a second he stood in the doorway, his eyes flitting around the familiar room that seemed filled with John Dawson's presence. Then he saw Jane sitting at the table. She looked up, eyes red, her face drawn with sorrow. Clay crossed the room and sat beside her. Outside a wind was springing up, rattling the limbs of the cottonwood like hollow bones.

"He's dead," Clay said. "I couldn't have thought more of him if he had been my own father. He's raised me since I was a button smaller than Skeeter. You're like a sister to me, Jane, and Skeeter's like a brother."

"I know, Clay." She patted his arm.

"We can't bring him back to life, Jane. But I swear I'll find the murdering son that killed John, and turn him over to the sheriff."

"But we haven't a thing to go on, Clay." She turned her sweet face to him.

"That's my job. I'll find out. We know Hank Feazle tried to buy the ranch. I'm asking myself why Feazle would offer a fair price for the C Over M when he's got more property now than he can run."

"You think Feazle—"

"I'm not sure, Jane. I do know Feazle ain't offering ten thousand dollars for a little spread after the best steers have been rustled, unless there's money in it for him somewhere. I'm going to town and find out."

From a set of deer antlers above the fireplace he took down his gunbelt. His guns were old, single action Colts his own father had brought West from St. Louis, when he and John Dawson pioneered this valley. Clay held them, balanced them easily in his hands. They were good guns. Once Pecos Smith had tried to buy them, told him they were guns for killers. Clay Rawlins had never killed a man. Now he knew he would.

"I'm afraid for you to go, Clay." Jane clutched his hand.

"I'll come back." His brown eyes looked into her blue ones. "I'll get the murderer alive if I can. If I can't—" he looked away—"I'm not afraid. Pecos showed me how to draw with both hands."

He broke the guns and stuffed the cylinders with cartridges. Then he buckled on his gun belt. Pecos Smith had told him he was fast. He'd wanted Clay to ride away with him, but Pecos was a gunman. Life held no happiness for killers. Now Clay was about to become one. There was no turning back. Something inside drove him on. The murderer of John Dawson had to die.

OUTSIDE Skeeter was playing under the big cottonwood. Death didn't mean much to a child. He knew his father was gone. He had wept, but youth takes life with little seriousness. The present is always too bright. Clay wished he was a boy again. But he was a man, and he had a job, a man-sized job.

He took Jane in his arms and kissed her. For a long minute he looked into her eyes, deep, dark, like a mountain pool. He felt her golden hair against his cheek.

"I don't know when I'll be back," he said. "But I don't think there's any danger. Stay close to the house, anyway, and don't let Skeeter play very far away. Slim'll be in at noon, and Whitey'll come in at night, too."

She nodded. "Be careful, Clay."

Then he was gone, out to the corral where he kept his roan. He threw a rope on the big horse and saddled him. Skeeter was looking through the corral bars.

"Where are you going, Clay? Can I go?"

"No, Skeeter, you stay here and take care of Jane."

He climbed aboard and started for Marlin. He looked out over the rolling grassland that made up the C Over M range. A year ago it had been dotted with whitefaces and half a dozen cowpokes riding herd, but not now. Rustlers had done their work. Only Slim and Whitey left with the one small herd that remained.

Clay pulled up his roan. The morning sun was high now, and hot. He looked across Swift Canyon to the pine-covered Destiny Mountains which seemed peacefully green. John had liked it there. It seemed only yesterday that they had all ridden high into the big pines for a picnic. Swift Canyon where the walls of Wildhorse River narrowed until they nearly met, and the water poured through in a white ribbon.

John had liked the pines of Destiny Mountains, but he had loved Swift Canyon. The C Over M owned both banks. John used to talk about a bridge so they could use the range on the other side. But nothing had ever come of it.

Clay's lips tightened. John would never see these things again. He was buried in the soil of the ranch he had made. It would be a tragedy if any but Dawson blood should ever own this land. The rustling? John's murder? Feazle's effort to buy? Something was behind all this, something sinister and unseen.

The cowboy's fingers tightened over the saddle horn until his muscles corded out in knots. When he found the murderer, he'd know what this unseen thing was, why someone was trying to force the Dawsons off the C Over M.

He looked back. Skeeter was still standing beside the corral, staring after him, one little hand shading his eyes against the sun. Clay kneed his bronc. He had a job to do.

Marlin was quiet, ominously so. Maybe it was Clay's taut nerves. He left his roan at the hitching rack in front of the saloon, and started for the batwings. A hand fell on his arm. He whirled, reaching for his gun butt.

"Kinda touchy, ain't you, Rawlins?" a soft voice asked.

Clay relaxed. It was Shorty Clark, one of Feazle's men.

"Maybe."

"The boss wants to see you. Back in his office." Shorty motioned with his head, and slouched into the saloon.

Clay hesitated. Feazle wouldn't want anything good. But no use passing up any bets. He entered the bank, nodded at the teller, and strode into Feazle's office.

THE banker spun around in his chair, and grinned. He reminded Clay of a rat. He had a thin face and a long nose, cruel black eyes that snapped as he looked at the cowboy.

"Sit down, Rawlins," he said in his squeaky voice.

"Reckon I'll stand, Feazle," and Clay stood, spread-legged, and looked at the banker.

"Suit yourself." Feazle lit a long cigar, and puffed out a cloud of smoke. "Maybe you wonder why I wanted to see you."

"Reckon I do."

"I want to buy the Dawson spread." He flicked off a bit of ash. It fell on his already gray vest. "Thought maybe you'd convince the gal she ought to sell."

"That's her business," Clay grated. "And I been wondering why a money squeezer like you is offering to buy a two-bit spread after the best steers been rustled."

"It can be developed," Feazle squeaked. "Course I can do some persuading, but I'd rather buy it straight."

"Maybe you been doing some persuading," Clay roared, leaning over the desk until his face was close to Feazle's. "Maybe you and your Shorty Clark did the rustling. Then when Dawson wouldn't sell, one of your gun hogs bushwhacked the old man,

figuring you could force the girl to sell."

"You're talking big words, Rawlins," the banker snarled, scooting back his chair.

An uneasy feeling of apprehension swept Clay. He straightened, eyes searching the room. A door was opening back of the banker. The black bore of a .45 slipped through the crack, its menacing muzzle aimed squarely at Clay's middle. He backed away from the desk, rage filling his body.

"If you're the killer, Feazle, I'll find it out. And I'll fill your rotten carcass so full of lead they'll think it's a sieve."

"Better think it over. The girl's got no business running a ranch. She'll listen to you. Or maybe you want to keep a job," he sneered. "Maybe you had a hand in the killing yourself."

Clay's face reddened with passion. For the first time in his life, he felt the desire to kill a man. Then he controlled himself. He had no proof. He backed out of the office and, turning, strode through the bank and into the sunshine.

He entered the saloon.

"Beer," he said to the paunchy barkeep, and stared unseeingly at the rows of bottles. Feazle wanted the C Over M, and Feazle wasn't a man to stand on legality when it came to getting what he wanted.

Loud voices jarred his consciousness. A big gent with his back to Clay was roaring at a little man in store clothes.

"I'm gonna cut your hide right off'n you," the big man shouted, and lurched unsteadily. "You're nothing but a damned tinhorn dressed up like a dude. I'm gonna slit your gullet, then I'll cut you up and hang you like a beef."

He slopped another drink into his glass and gulped it. Clay had seen him once before. Knifer Brady, the badman of Marlin as fast with his knife as most men are with their guns. He'd stood trial for more than one murder, but had never been convicted.

The little man stared back into Knifer's whisky-inflamed eyes, no fear showing in his face.

"Go home and sleep it off. I have no quarrel with you."

"So I'm drunk! Why, you damned little son of a bay mule, I'm gonna cut that big tongue right out of your mouth."

Clay tensed. This was more than drunken words. The little man was a stranger to Clay. But he couldn't stand there and see him cut down by a drunken killer.

The barkeep was staring at Knifer tensely. A half dozen men playing stud looked up curiously, then went on playing. The killer downed another drink.

"I'm gonna beat your insides out, dude."

HE reached out with his big hand. But the stranger ducked and came up with a stinging right to Knifer's jaw. The killer let out a bellow of rage, kicked out with his right foot, and the little gent sprawled on his stomach, grunting in sudden pain. Knifer stepped back, his right hand flashing to the back of his neck where he carried his throwing knife. But Clay moved faster. He drew his right-hand gun with blurring speed, jabbed the muzzle into the killer's back.

"Drop your hand, Knifer," he hissed, "or you'll have lead in your stomach."

Knifer dropped his hand and whirled, cursing.

"You damned—" Then he stopped as Clay snatched the knife from its scabbard.

"Move—" Clay motioned toward the door—"and drift. If there's any killing done around here, it'll be with lead, and you'll be on the receiving end."

Brady strode out of the saloon, Clay behind him. He watched the killer swing into leather and drum out of town. He had another enemy

now, an enemy who would strike with the cunning and deadliness of a rattlesnake. Maybe Brady was one of Feazle's men. Nobody seemed to know, but some unseen hand had kept him out of the hangman's noose.

Clay shrugged his shoulders and went back to the bar. He'd worry about Brady later. Right now the job was to find the murderer of John Dawson.

The little gent was on his feet, shaking the sawdust out of his clothes. He held out his hand, and Clay clasped it. There was something likable about his honest eyes and firm handshake.

"I'm Frank Brecken," he said. "Much obliged. That's the second time I've almost been killed since I came to Marlin."

"I'm Clay Rawlins. Reckon this burg does seem kinda tough to an Easterner."

"Clay Rawlins?" Brecken wrinkled his brow. "I've heard of you."

"Maybe not," Clay grinned. "I'm not very notorious."

"I remember," Brecken slapped his hand on the bar. "You're the foster son or something of John Dawson, the fellow who was murdered the other day."

"Yeah." Clay nodded. "How'd you happen to know that?"

"I'm with the R. M. Railroad Company. I came to Marlin the day they found Dawson. I wanted to see him, but got here a day too late." He turned to the barkeep. "Whisky, and give Rawlins anything he wants."

"Beer." Clay wrinkled his brow. "Maybe this ain't my business, but I'm kinda looking after the ranch. What'd you want to see Dawson about?"

"It's your business all right," Brecken assured him. "My company wants a right of way through the Dawson ranch. The only place in twenty miles where we can bridge Wildhorse River is Swift Canyon."

A THOUGHT struck Clay with the impact of a .45 slug. Feazle was a banker, and he knew most of the business of Wildhorse Valley. He'd known of the railroad's plan. That was why he wanted the C Over M.

"I reckon Jane Dawson'll sell you the right of way if you're offering a fair price."

"The price'll be right," Brecken told him.

"What about this other time you almost cashed in?"

"The day I got here. I was walking around town when somebody took a shot at me. Maybe it was some drunk celebrating, but the damned bullet didn't miss my head an inch."

"Well, try to stay out of trouble." Clay grinned and shook hands again. "Come out to the ranch whenever you want to."

He strode across the street to Sheriff Winton's office. The sheriff looked up from his desk.

"Hello, Clay," he beamed. "Haven't seen you for a coon's age." He ran one hand through rumpled white hair as he motioned toward a chair with the other.

Clay sank into the rawhide seat, but didn't smile back.

"Haven't been to town for quite a spell," he said.

"I'm plumb sorry I couldn't get to the funeral. More rustling up the Wildhorse. I just got back."

"Anything more on John's murder?"

"Not a damned thing. If we could of found some clue on the body, we'd have something to go on. But there wasn't a thing."

"I think I know who did it."

"Yeah?" Winton sat up in his chair.

"Hank Feazle."

"Feazle?" Winton sat back again and began to fill his pipe. "Reckon Feazle ain't too good to do murder. What makes you think it's him?"

"Because he sees a chance to make some money. He tried to buy the C

Over M from John and John wouldn't sell. I figure he killed the old man so he could force Jane out, knowing a girl would find running a ranch pretty tough business. The only thing that stumped me was why he would want the C Over M. But this railroad man Brecken tells me Swift Canyon is the only place where they can bridge the Wildhorse.

"If Feazle owns the C Over M, he can hold the railroad company up. Besides, he owns the Slash T and Twin M's, and the best route up the valley lays through them ranches. There's a fortune in it for him."

Winton nodded.

"Brecken just told me somebody took a shot at him the first day he was in town. Just now Knifer Brady was working up a fight with him. With Brecken out of the way, it might take days for the railroad company to send in another man. And Feazle figures he can force Jane to sell before then."

"It's a good theory, Clay—" the sheriff nodded his grizzled head again —"but what honest to hell proof have you got?"

"None, but it all figures out to one answer."

"Maybe, Clay, but there ain't nothing I can do yet. Let Feazle make his play, and he'll give his hand away."

A sudden thought chilled Clay's veins. "Let Feazle make his play." Brecken was still alive. Jane still owned the ranch. Then his play would have to be against Jane herself. If Brady was Feazle's man, he'd have told Feazle what had happened by this time. Or some of the hard case crew in the saloon who had just seen the row would tell the banker. By now Feazle would know he had to work fast, or the railroad would make its deal with Jane.

Clay jumped to his feet.

"I'm going, sheriff. If my hunch is right, Feazle won't be long making that play. You'd better be ready to come high-tailing after me."

CLAY leaped into his saddle and pounded out of town, his heart cold with the paralysis of fear. Feazle hadn't intended showing his hand. He had planned on waiting and letting Jane make up her mind to sell. That would be all legal and aboveboard.

But now the picture was different. Feazle had to come into the open, had to drive his deal home, even if it meant more killings. Jane? Skeeter? Clay had never realized before how much he loved them. He'd seen Skeeter learn to walk, learn to ride a horse. The button was more than a kid brother. And Jane? He'd always thought of her as a sister. Now he knew it wasn't as a sister he loved her, that she meant more to him than anything else in the world. Something tightened in his throat.

Then he saw the C Over M ranch buildings. A twist of blue was rising from the cabin's chimney. He skidded his horse to a stop, and hit the ground running.

"Clay," he heard a high-pitched voice. "Clay."

Skeeter bounded from around the house into Clay's arms.

"Jane? Where is she?"

"She's gone," the boy swallowed, face white with fear. "Two hombres came and got her. I was in the barn. I didn't see her till I heard a shot."

"A shot?" Clay ran into the house, then stopped in horror. Slim lay on the rough floor, his head in a pool of blood. One stiffening hand held his gun, the other drawn into a tight fist under him.

Clay turned him over. A bullet wound showed in his shoulder, but the death wound had been from the knife, an ugly, blood-clotted gash in his throat.

He whirled to the boy.

"What'd they look like?"

"I couldn't see very well. I heard sis scream and ran out of the barn. They had her on a horse and was high tailing. One was a big gent on a pinto, the other was smaller and rode a bay."

"Brady," Clay muttered. He stood staring at the dead cowboy. Maybe it wasn't Feazle after all. Maybe Brady and his gang were playing this game.

Clay ran out of the house and toward this roan.

"I'm going, too," Skeeter yelled. "I'm gonna git the hombre that took sis. I got my bronc saddled up."

Clay whirled. He'd forgotten the button.

"All right, Skeeter. Light a shuck."

The boy scooted for the barn and came out with his bay mare.

"I got my gun," he waved his slingshot. "I'd 'a' fixed them jiggers if I'd been in the house. They got away before I saw 'em, damn 'em."

He climbed into his saddle.

"Which way'd they go?"

"Over the ridge."

Clay nodded. He'd heard Brady had a hideout in the brakes. Buckhorn Creek headed up there in the Bear Claws. They rode fast, but slow enough so that Clay could pick up occasional tracks. Brady and his man were not thinking of pursuit. When they crossed the mile of sand that lay between the Buckhorn and the Wildhorse, Clay lost the trail. The wind had drifted the sand so that the hoofprints of the outlaws' broncs were lost. Then a fragment of brown cloth set him right. Jane's skirt. Good girl. She'd known he'd come.

They started down the cliffs of Buckhorn Canyon, through the junipers and piñons. When they reached the bottom, Clay reined up.

"This is as far as you're going, button," he said. "I'm heading in after Jane, but I've gotta have help. It's up to you to get Sheriff Winton. Follow this creek to Marlin, and tell the sheriff to burn the breeze."

Skeeter hesitated, then swelled in importance.

"I'll git him, partner," he said.

"If you see anybody, git off the trail. It's up to you, Skeeter."

"I'll git him," Skeeter repeated, his little face drawn up in determination.

CLAY watched him disappear around the creek bend, and swore under his breath. The kid might meet some of the outlaws, but it was better than taking him into trouble. And plenty of trouble lay ahead.

He rode for an hour, the sun almost hidden by the narrowing walls of the canyon. Plenty of chance for an ambush here in this jumble of broken rock, but he had to take that chance. The chill of fear still gripped him. Jane in the hands of Knifer Brady!

Ahead he heard the roar of a waterfall. He rounded an outcropping of rock, forcing his roan into the cold water of the creek. The walls were barely wide enough to let him through. Then he saw the falls. A hundred feet of cliff rose ahead, the creek pouring over an overhanging ledge of granite. It fell, a silvery ribbon of crystal, and roared into a pool, blue black in the gloomy shadow of the canyon.

Clay cursed himself. He must have lost the trail. Nobody could force a bronc up that cliff. They must have left the creek somewhere, and he hadn't seen the tracks.

A hard voice rose above the roar of the water.

"Reach for the moon, Mister. You stepped plumb into trouble coming up here."

Clay whirled, lifting his hands. He saw Shorty Clark glaring at him over the bore of his Colt. Shorty Clark? Then it was Hank Feazle. Brady was one of the banker's men. Feazle was the unseen power that had helped him escape the hangman's noose.

"The boss'll be plumb glad to see you again, Rawlins," Clark sneered. "Git down off that bronc."

Clay swung out of leather, his hands above his head. He felt Clark's gun muzzle bite deeper into his back as the outlaw jerked Clay's guns from leather.

"Under the falls, cowboy. And don't

make a move or I'll pump some lead into your gizzard."

Clay walked through the spray, saw a cave loom ahead, its gloomy mouth yawning darkly. He stumbled over a rock, caught himself, heard Clark laugh.

"Keep going, Mister. Your gal's waiting for you."

Black fear tugged again at Clay's heart. Only one fate could lay ahead for him—death. Maybe worse for Jane.

Ahead loomed the wall of a cabin. A perfect hideout. No one could see the cave from outside. Footprints would be lost in the shallow water at the edge of the pool. Clark opened the door and shoved Clay inside. Brady and a little gent with a harelip were playing cards.

"So the big curly wolf came along," Brady sneered, "and got himself into a jackpot for being too nosey. Shove him back with the gal, Shorty."

Clark's gun muzzle prodded Clay in the back again. He walked past an open fire in one corner, past another rickety table. The outlaw pulled open the back door and shoved Clay through. He staggered across the room to crash into a rock wall.

HE straightened, trying to see in the thick gloom. It wasn't a room, seemed to be a corner of the cave closed off by the cabin. His eyes searched the semi-darkness for the girl. He saw her, crouching in one corner.

"Clay," she breathed, and ran into his arms.

He held her close.

"I found out something today, Jane," he said. "Found out that you aren't just a sister as I'd always thought you. I love you, love you as a man can only love one woman."

"I wondered when you'd find that out." She smiled at him.

"We'll get out of here. We'll clean up this outfit and get the ranch back to a paying basis."

"But we'll never get out, Clay, not unless we deed Feazle the ranch."

"I figured that was his game. You can't deed him the ranch, Jane. He'll kill us the minute you do. Long as you're alive, he'll keep you that way to sign it over to him."

She shrank back, shivering.

"I'm scared, Clay. I always thought I was brave, but I'm not."

He pressed her hands, then let her go.

"Not a chance to get out of here," he muttered. "Rock walls on three sides, and logs on the other."

He ran his hands over the cabin wall, tried the door, but there was no give. He lit a match. It glowed dully, and went out, leaving them in blacker darkness. The girl shivered. Clay drew her close.

"Remember, Jane, don't sign anything."

What seemed hours dragged by.

"The sheriff ought to be here soon," he tried to encourage her, but didn't believe his own words. Winton would never see the cave if he did come.

Then voices. The door swung open. Brady stood in the doorway.

"Come on, you," he growled, hate showing dark on his face. "Time for business."

They stumbled out of the cold cave into the cabin. Feazle stood beside the table, ratty eyes gleaming.

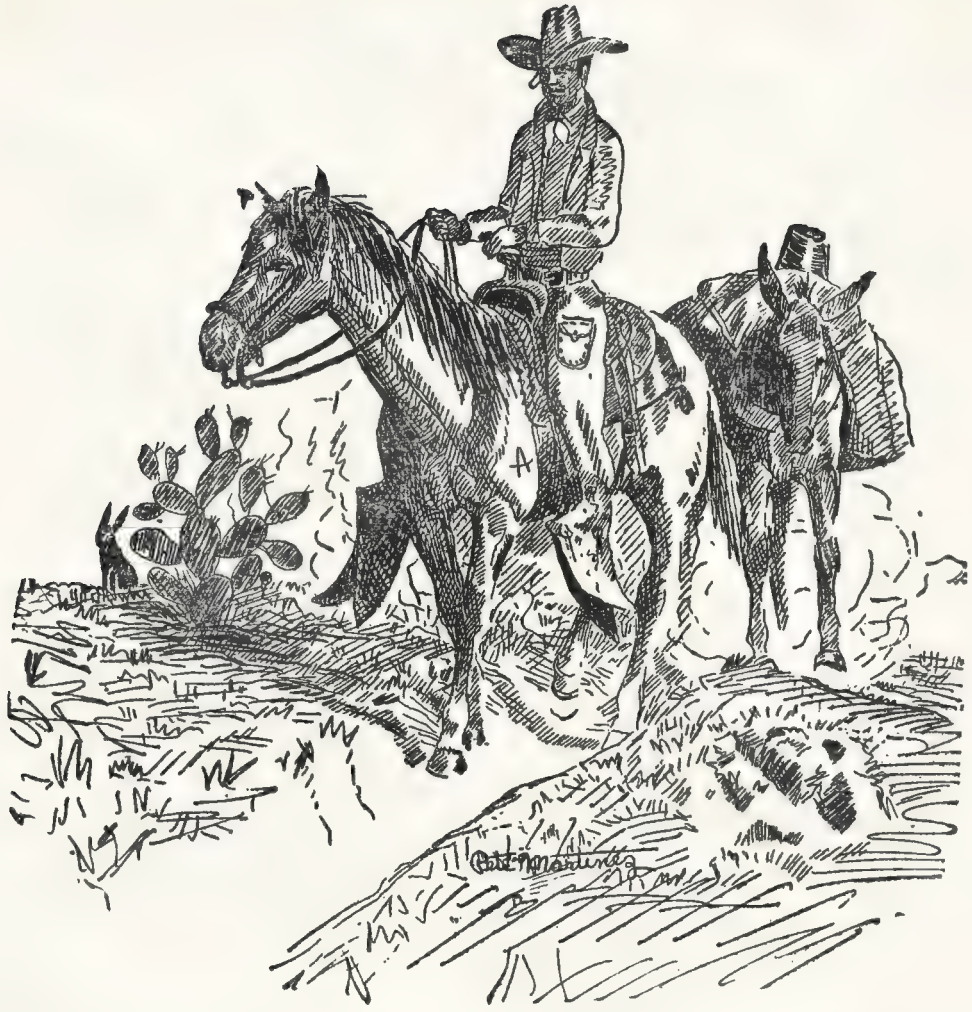
"The shoe begins to tighten, my friends," he squeaked. "Now maybe you wished you'd sold. But it's too late. Here—" he held up a piece of paper—"you'll sign the C Over M to me, and acknowledge the ten thousand dollars which you ain't getting."

He shoved the pen into Jane's hand, but she backed away.

"I'm not signing anything, you mangy coyote," she snapped.

"Got a lot of spunk, ain't you, gal? I figured you might be kinda stubborn. In that case we'll do a little persuading. Brady—" he nodded at the grinning killer—"bring over them matches."

Clay let his eyes slide around the



room. His guns were hanging on the far wall. To run for it was certain death. The harelipped gent was standing beside Feazle, .45 in his hand.

"I'm right glad your friend dropped in, Miss Dawson," Feazle grinned. "Otherwise I'd have to work on you, and that would have been plumb wicked. Now we can drive these matches under his fingernails instead of yours. If you don't sign, I'm afraid it'll be right painful."

Clay looked at the girl, saw agony in her eyes. He edged toward the fire, a crazy plan entering his head.

"You're loco, Feazle, to think she'll sign the ranch over to you. When she does, you'll kill us both."

The banker grinned evilly.

"You're a smart hombre, Rawlins. Sure I'll have to kill you. If she signs, it'll be easy. Otherwise—" he shrugged—"like I said, it'll be right painful."

Clay edged closer to the fire.

"All right, Jane," he said. "Go ahead and sign. Looks like we're licked."

He saw a startled look of scorn cross her face. She reached for the pen.

BRADY and the banker crowded around the table. The harelipped gent came closer, his eyes on the girl. Then Clay moved with the speed

of a springing cougar. He leaped toward the fire, one foot swinging through the flaming sticks. The harelipped man swung back to Clay, triggered his gun, but a red comet of fire was over him. The slug went wild. He screamed in pain, dropped his gun, struck at the flames that leaped from his shirt.

As Clay picked up the outlaw's gun, Brady's hand flashed to the back of his neck for his knife. But Clay had leaped again, this time to the banker. Feazle was clawing at his gun, but Clay swung in front of him. His left hand grabbed the Colt from the banker's skinny hand and snapped a shot at Brady. Feazle's twisting body threw his aim off. He heard the lead thud into a log above Knifer's head.

As Brady's hand blurred for his knife, Clay foresaw his action, and ducked. The knife flew over his head, a striking serpent of silver. Then Clay triggered both .45's. Gunfire rocked the cabin, orange fire splitting the gloom. Through eddying smoke, he saw Brady spin back and collapse across the table.

Clay swung Feazle around, let drive his left hand. There was a snap like bone cracking, and the banker hit the floor, a motionless heap.

Clay grabbed up a blanket, and wrapped the burning body of the harelipped gent. He yelled, twisting his charred legs in agony, but the flames were smothered.

Jane was beside them, Clay's single action guns in her hands.

"I doubted you," she said.

"I don't blame you." He lashed a rope around the groaning outlaw. "It was now or never."

'Is he burned badly?"

"Reckon he'll live to hang," Clay grinned.

He bent over the still form of the banker.

"This'll bring him out of it," he picked up a bucket of water, and splashed it over Feazle's face. The banker stirred, groaned. He opened his ratlike eyes. Clay jabbed the muzzle of his gun deep into Feazle's belly.

"Talk," he grated, "or I'll let daylight into you. Who killed John Dawson?"

"Clark," the banker whimpered. "Don't kill me."

"Who ordered him to?" He jabbed the gun deeper.

"I did. I wanted the C Over M so I could control the right of way from Marlin to the Wildhorse. Don't kill me."

The cabin door was flung open. Winton, Skeeter, and a posse swarmed in. The sheriff stopped in amazement.

"Looks like the war's over," he said. "Sure thought we'd got here too late. Heard the shooting and came a-tearing."

"Where's Clark?" Clay asked.

"We got him, him and a couple of other sidewinders. Reckon we about wound up this rustling business."

"And John Dawson's murder," Clay said. "Feazle just confessed." He looked at Jane and smiled.

"I told you we'd find out who the rattlesnake was. Now we can go back and run the C Over M like it oughtta be run."

Jane came toward him, her eyes shining, but Skeeter ran between them. He was holding his slingshot high in one hand.

"You sure cleaned them, pardner," he yelled, "but wished you'd waited until I got here. I'd 'a' fixed 'em."

Hitch in Hearts

The buckshot-loaded quirt landed behind his ear.

By P. H. Branford

Although her loyalty belonged to a sheepherder, her love was entrusted to a cowman. But when sheep turned up missing, hate rode Laurette Sherlon's saddle and broke the bliss bargain of the diamond hitch.

WHEN Laurette heard the sound of shots ringing out beyond the crest of the ridge, she urged her sorrel pony up the steep grade—and stopped short.

There on the "cattle" side of the ridge lay the sheep she had been hunting; fifteen head of them—dead. Twisting about in her saddle, she watched a fast disappearing rider.

"Droopy Collister!" she flared. "Dwight's rider!"

Red lips a straight line, she whirled her pony and hurried back to her father's sheep camp at Granite Springs. Old Mart Sherlon, who had been obliged to fire a Mexican herder a short time ago, was just riding up to the wagon when his daughter arrived there.

"What's the hurry?" he called. "You come chargin' up that slant like—"

"Plenty's the matter!" she inter-

rupted, hastening on to relate the killing of the sheep.

"Huh!" old Mart grunted. "So that's it! Our *friend*, Mr. Denslow, pulls a trick like that. And after him goin' to all the trouble and expense of buyin' you that beautiful diamond ring!"

"Just a minute!" the girl protested. "Because Droopy Collister killed those sheep isn't any reason that he was acting on Dwight's orders."

"It's Dwight's summer range, ain't it?" her father parried. "I think I'll go over and have a talk with young Denslow. Tell him a thing or two that— Huh! There he comes now!"

Together they watched the tall, broad-shouldered rider loping toward them. As the distance narrowed, he doffed his hat, smiled and called:

"Hello, shepherdess — and flock master! Are the blattin' blackfaces doin' all right?"

"Yeh." Mart Sherlon's voice was chill. "Them that don't make the mistake of strayin' over acrost Burnt Ridge."

The older man's manner quickly chased the smile from Dwight Denslow's dark eyes. He turned to Laurette who, rather falteringly, told him of what had occurred.

"But I told dad," she concluded, "that I didn't think Droopy Collister was following your orders when he killed those sheep. He wasn't, was he, Dwight?"

The visitor hesitated. "I—I don't recall ever givin' him any such orders."

"Then you're tellin' us that a hired man of your'n is takin' his boss' interests too much to heart!" old Mart Sherlon cut in. "But you're not makin' it stick, Denslow. When you hired a man like Droopy Collister, you must've had some reason for doin' it. I know of better men you turned down."

"I'll pay you for those sheep that he shot," the cowman offered. "Figure up how much it amounts to and I'll—"

"It ain't a few head of sheep so much as it is the principle," Sherlon interrupted. "It's dirty, underhanded business, this killin' stock, Denslow. 'Specially when you've been posin' as a friend—and makin' Laurette there believe you. Money can't square them things!"

A slow flush of resentment crept under the copper of Dwight Denslow's face as he turned again to brown-haired Laurette.

"What do you think?" he asked, dark eyes unwavering.

"I think you're on the square, Dwight," she answered. "You know that. But, to prove it, I'd suggest that you fire Droopy Collister."

"No," he answered finally. "I—I'd rather not do that, Laurette girl."

"There you are!" snorted old Sherlon. "You can't hire a man to do dirty work, then turn around and fire him. He might have too much to tell!"

"Will you fire Droopy Collister?" Laurette demanded.

"No, I—"

"All right!" she snapped. "Here's your ring, Dwight. Good-by."

"But, Laurette!" he pleaded. "You don't understand."

"Get out, Denslow!" Mart Sherlon cut in. "And stay on your own side of Burnt Ridge."

"Sure, if you say so—you blat-crazy sheepherder!"

Laurette, turning away to climb into the sheep wagon, winced at Dwight Denslow's words. When her father followed her into the wagon, she was crying.

"Don't do that," he said. "Be thankful for the good riddance of bad rubbish."

"That's easy to say, dad," she quavered, trying hard to control her trembling lips. "But I loved Dwight. More than anything—in the—"

"Poor kid! I'm afraid he kinda took us both in. But it all goes to show that no matter how a man acts, you can't always tell what he's thinkin'."

DURING the next three days Laurette shunned the Burnt Ridge territory. On the fourth day, however, she encountered Droopy Collister who was riding across sheep range.

"Hey, you!" called the latter. "What's the idee of blabbin' around that you *seen* me killin' your dad's woollies?"

"You did kill them!" she snapped, trying to rein her pony around this rider blocking her path. "And what's the 'idee' of your riding on this range?"

He leered at her with slate gray eyes, one of which was swollen and slightly black. "Since you and my boss had a spat I thought maybe I'd stand some chance with you. I allus did like your looks, girlie."

"You look as if you'd had more than a spat," she answered contemptuously. "You look like you did after my brother, Tom, got through with you three years ago. You got that licking for annoying me. And you'll get the loaded end of my quirt over your head if you don't—"

He flung out his arm, caught her around the waist. But the girl's right hand was free. *Thud!* went the buckshot-loaded end of the quirt, landing behind Collister's ear. Already leaning far out of his saddle to seize Laurette, he toppled from his horse, pitched limply to the ground—stunned.

The girl stared as if she, too, were somewhat stunned at the effectiveness of that blow. Hoofs were clattering behind her. She turned to see Dwight Denslow riding up. The latter, accompanied by Burge Snell, another cowman who owned adjoining range, touched his hat.

"Nice work," he said. "Burge and me saw what was goin' on. We were just comin' to help you when—"

"Thanks for your gallantry." Laurette's voice, and eyes, were as chill as dawn on the high range. "I'm glad I could save you the embarrassment of interfering with your esteemed rider, Mr. Collister. You seem to think so much of him!"

"You talk like it was my fault that he—"

"It's your fault that Droopy Collister's around this range!" she flared.

"Miss Sherlon's right, Dwight," put in the husky, middle-aged Burge Snell. "About the time I figgered this old sheep-cattle grudge was forgotten, you hire that worthless hound!" And he pointed a stubby finger to the still fallen Collister. "Why don't you fire him, man?"

"Because Droopy's so good on killing sheep," cried Laurette. "You see, Mr. Snell, it's hard to find riders that will *drive* stray sheep across a range boundary, just for the pleasure of slaughtering them!"

"Did Droopy drive your strays across the line?" Dwight asked, his dark eyes regarding her levelly.

"Quite possibly," she retorted. "He must have some purpose in slipping over on our range. Please tell him to stay on your side of Burnt Ridge hereafter. And, as dad told you, you might stay over there with him."

"I see." The young man's jaw set sternly. "You haven't cooled off enough yet to listen to reason."

Laurette didn't a n s w e r. She whirled her horse and loped away. Once, as she topped a high ridge, she turned to glance back. She saw that Droopy Collister was on his feet now. But not for long. Dwight Denslow was moving toward him—knocking him flat again.

Could it be, the girl asked herself, that Droopy was really being fired? If so, perhaps her unpleasant experience hadn't been in vain.

BUT Droopy wasn't fired, Laurette learned two days later. He was still riding for Dwight. Sighting him, the girl swerved into a patch of timber, where she remained until the gangling stoop-shouldered rider had passed out of sight.

That afternoon dark clouds banked densely behind the summit of the Big Horns. The breeze turned into a chill wind that swept across the high range. Laurette, leaving her father with the grazing band of sheep, rode back to the wagon at Granite Springs.

Big drops of rain splattered dismally on the tarpaulin, and glistening drops rose to well down the cheeks of the girl lying on the bunk at the rear of the wagon. She wished it were time to move the sheep back down to the lower country where the lambs would be shipped. This past week had been one of misery for her.

All afternoon she brooded there in the lonely sheep wagon. At last she rose, washed the tear stains from her face, and set about cooking supper. Old Mart came in about six o'clock, water trickling down the creases of his black slicker and off his hat brim.

"Dang that worthless Mexican herder!" he growled. "I wouldn't be out herdin' my own sheep if he'd been worth a darn."

"Maybe I could go down the mountain and find another one, dad," Laurette volunteered somewhat eagerly.

"Maybe so," he grumbled. "But you'll have to wait till this storm's over. Well, I guess I'll eat and then take a sack of salt over to the bedground."

After supper Sherlon, a fifty-pound sack of salt slung across his saddle, started leading his horse up the ridge beyond which he and his flock would soon be bedding down for the night. Laurette waved to him. She watched him disappear into the gathering gloom through which came the tinkle of sheep bells.

GRAYISH-white clouds, hanging along the earth, obscured the high range when Laurette awoke the next morning. Peaks, ridges, slopes and valleys were draped in the misty fog through which it was impossible to see more than a hundred yards. Quickly the girl started a fire, and set about getting breakfast for her father.

The biscuits were mixed and baked; the bacon was fried. And still Mart Sherlon didn't appear. Worried, wondering if he were having trouble with the sheep, Laurette slipped into her heavy jacket. She went out and caught her hobbled pony which grazed near the wagon.

Soon she was riding toward the bedground, dismounting before her father's tepee. But the place was empty. She mounted her pony, started to circle the sheep which grazed nearby. And as she rode, she called: "Dad!"

At last Scotty, the little sheep dog, came bounding toward her out of the fog. But the little dog was limping.

"Scotty! What's wrong?" Laurette swung from her saddle, quickly examining the canine forepaw which dangled above the ground. "Why, you've been nipped by a bullet!"

She leaped back into her saddle, again called loudly to her father. But there was no response. She quickened her pace; saw that a large number of the sheep were missing.

"You stay here, Scotty," she told the little dog. "Watch the sheep. I've got to find dad—and the rest of the band!"

Far away, barely audible, came the distant tinkle of a bell. It came from the north; and northward rode the agitated girl. No doubt her father had gone in pursuit of the sheep that had left the main band. But that slight wound in Scotty's leg! That was no rock scratch or sagebrush snag. Something was wrong.

Pulses throbbing, ears keenly attuned to catch the sound of that unseen bell, the girl hurried along a course which took her nearer and nearer to the Denslow cattle range. The farther she rode, the more suspicious she became. Had Droopy Collister taken advantage of this obscuring fog to drive more of the sheep over to cattle range—and then kill

them? Or was Dwight a party to the scheme?

"No!" moaned the frantic girl. "He wouldn't—he *couldn't*—"

Faintly came the tinkle of the bell. It was closer now. Ahead loomed a clump of pines. Straight for it spurred Laurette. Soon she was riding along a dim trail beneath dripping branches. Halting near a big tree she called:

"Dad! Where—"

From behind the thick trunk leaped a man—Droopy Collister. His talon-like hands seized Laurette. Jerking her from the saddle, he snarled:

"So you heard me ringin' that bell, did you, purty girl? And followed the sound—just like I was smart enough to figger you would—when you started huntin' fer your old man!"

"Let me alone!" she cried, fighting desperately.

"Not this time, you don't git away!" he rasped. "I'll make you pay fer that crack over the head you give me!"

A rope tightened around the girl's arms, one end of it drawn by Collister around the tree. Then hard knots were tied, and Laurette was a prisoner, helplessly bound.

"Dwight'll kill you for this!" she said. "He knocked you down the other day for—"

"That?" Collister taunted. "Why, that was just a little sham battle fer Burge Snell's benefit. Dwight knowed you was watchin'."

She bit her lip. "What are you going to do with me?"

"Let you stay tied up here till you cool off a little and till I can git back. Right now—" he laughed gratingly—"I've got to go and help my boss tend to a bunch of sheep. Pile 'em up in a certain rocky crevice."

"Where's my father?" she demanded. "What did you do with him?"

"Left him hogtied in a gulch that'll be awful hard to find," he sneered. "That was Dwight Denslow's idee. Seems like your old man and him ain't been gittin' along none too well lately. And Dwight plumb had his heart set on marryin' you! That's the part that griped him. Havin' his ring handed back by a sheepherder's daughter!"

He turned, walked over to where one of Dwight Denslow's horses was tied, mounted and rode away.

"I'll be back, sweetheart!" he gloated in parting. "And when I do, we'll git a lot better acquainted, you and me!"

His laugh died away in the fog. And Laurette's hope of finding her father died away with it. Probably her father was already dead, a penalty suffered because she had thrown Dwight Denslow's ring back at him! A sob caught in her throat as she strained at the securely tied ropes.

Numbness was creeping over her when, out of the mountain fog, there came the clink of a horseshoe striking against rock. Then, from out of the gray mists, appeared a rider. But it wasn't Droopy Collister, as the girl had feared. It was Dwight Denslow. He heard her cry, spurred toward her, whipped out his knife and cut the ropes which bound her.

"LAURETTE!" He supported her with his strong arms. "I thought I heard a sheep bell ringing up this way. But where—"

"Yes—where!" She flung the words at him. "Where's my father? What have you and that precious rider of yours—Droopy Collister—done with him?"

"Droopy—?" He hesitated, staring at her. "Was he the one that tied you up to that tree?"

"Who else would it be?" she retorted. "But if you're playing another sham battle by rescuing me, you won't gain anything by it! Where are those sheep you drove away? Where's—my father?"

"I don't know where he is," her companion answered. "I don't know where Droopy is."

"You lie!" she charged. "You're going to help him pile a lot of our

sheep in a rocky crevice somewhere. He told me so."

"Did he? Well! I hadn't heard about it. But if Droopy said that, and you say it, it must be so!" He whirled away, swung into his saddle. And, good-looking face set grimly, he picked up Droopy Collister's trail.

A rush of contrition seized Laurette as she stood there watching him disappear among the fog-swathed pines.

"Dwight!" she called. But if he heard, he paid no heed. Soon the mists swallowed him up, leaving only a few telltale horse tracks to betray which way he—and Droopy Collister—had gone.

Yet it wasn't the loss of sheep that Laurette was concerned about just now. It was the safety of her father. Somewhere there must be a trail left by the stolen sheep. If only she had ignored that tinkling bell in the first place, instead of riding into the cunning Droopy's trap.

Arms still aching from the rope, she mounted her pony and headed back for the sheep still near the bedground. Once back there, she readily picked up the tracks and started to follow.

She had ridden less than a quarter-mile before she came upon her father's saddled horse. With bridle reins dragging in the wet grass, the animal was cropping at the grass on the brink of a small gulch. Laurette bounded to the ground, ran to the brink of the gulch—and emitted a low cry. There, securely wedged between a couple of boulders below, lay her tightly bound father.

"Dad!" moaned the girl, her trembling fingers loosening the rope. "Thank heaven they didn't—kill you!"

"I was beginnin' to wish they had," he growled. "Dang their hides! But now I'm glad they didn't. Is my horse still around, girl? Is my rifle still on the saddle?"

"Yes," she answered, pressing her colorless lips to his cheek. "But you're in no condition to start out on anybody's trail, old-timer. You're coming back to the sheep wagon with me, and thaw out."

His jaw set. "Not now, Laurette. If you think I'm goin' to set around a fire while Droopy Collister and that sheep-killin' boss of his raids me, you're wrong!"

His words brought a queer sensation to the girl. "Then Droopy wasn't alone when he raided the band?" she asked.

"Alone—no!" old Mart Sherlon snorted, struggling to his feet. "Another gent was with him when they slipped up to my bedground last night. A gent Droopy called 'Dwight'. But we'll talk about that later!"

Her heart sank. "You're going to trail those missing sheep?"

"You're darn right I am! But you'd better hike back to camp, young lady."

"Not much!" she disagreed. "I'm not going to lose you in this fog again. I'm staying with you, dad."

"All right. But if we suddenly bump into a mess of flyin' lead, promise me you'll duck into cover."

"I promise."

TOGETHER they started to follow the trail left by the two or three hundred head of sheep which had been stolen.

"They can't be very far away," old Mart declared. "Them skunks couldn't 've moved 'em very far before daylight."

Yet the trailing was slow and tedious. The course wound over rocky territory. It led ever toward the misty ramparts of the summit, past gulches filled with eternal snows of the high country.

"We've got to move faster," old Mart observed. "It's startin' to rain again and wash out what little trail there is. In another hour we'll not be able to track at all."

"We must be heading for Summit Peak," Laurette answered. "Boo-o! Who'd ever think this was August?"

"And who'd ever thought, a month ago, that Dwight Denslow would do what he *is* doin'?" her father replied.

Laurette didn't answer that. She had pondered the same question as she followed along in her father's wake. But those thoughts produced visions of a future as gray as the all-enveloping fog itself. They brought a dull chill to her heart more numbing than the wind of this above-timberline altitude.

"Huh!" grunted old Mart at last. "Funny we ain't run onto them sheep piled up somewheres by now. Say, do you s'pose they ain't aimin' to kill 'em? Kinda looks to me like they might be herdin' 'em over the mountain, headin' for Slide-Rock Pass—over beyond Summit Peak there!"

"But they can't be past the peak by this time," Laurette said. "No matter how fast they might've crowded them, they couldn't—"

She stopped as a faint *bla-a-a!* came drifting up the towering divide over which she and her father were passing.

"You're right!" Sherlon growled. "They ain't past the peak. They're around on the north side of it, though!" He reined his horse in the direction from which that betraying sound had come.

As they rode through the rain and fog, they could hear a chorus of blatting. But there was no tinkling of sheep bells. And there was reason for that, as the girl and her father had noticed along the trail. Back there, close to the starting point, lay three bell ewes—dead. Killing them, apparently, had been easier than catching them and removing the telltale bells from their necks.

"Better stay back here," Sherlon told his daughter. "I'm goin' to try slippin' up on them two hombres. And the first one of 'em that shows fight—well, I'll drill with a bullet outta this old .30-30." He reached down, jerked the carbine from its scabbard.

But Laurette couldn't have stayed back if she had wanted to. Curiosity, and that gripping sensation about her heart when she thought of Dwight Denslow's being drilled with a bullet, made her follow her father.

They angled down the high divide, circled a small lake at the foot of Summit Peak, drawing nearer and nearer to the location of the stolen sheep. Off to the left, the girl caught sight of a small bunch of cattle huddled in a crudely built corral. Beyond that, she thought she glimpsed a tall, erect rider. But just then her pony slipped on a patch of ice and half fell.

"Please stay back!" her father urged. "Let me go ahead and jump them hombres."

He started on. But as before the curious, pulse-quickened girl followed after. And when her father disappeared over a rocky ledge, she rapidly closed the distance.

Laurette was about to gain that same ledge when her father, whirling his mount, came dashing back toward her.

"Wait!" He pointed ahead to where four men, barely discernible through the fog, were crowding the bunch of stolen sheep into another crudely built enclosure. "I've got to sneak up on 'em from the other side. They'll see me comin' this way!"

"But with four of them—"

A ringing shot cut short the words of the wide-eyed girl. Thinking that the men had started to kill the sheep, both she and her father craned their necks to see over the rocky ledge.

But what they saw was one man falling. A chorus of wild yells went up. There were two more shots, and another man swayed to the earth.

"Now what the—" blurted Mart Sherlon. "Look, girl! It's—Dwight Denslow! And he's pourin' lead into them hombres down at the corral!"

"And that one man shooting at him, dad!" she choked. "It's Pancho Sanchez, the sheep-losing herder you fired! He's trying to sneak up on

Dwight. Stop him, dad! Give me that gun!"

But Sherlon was already bringing the weapon up to his shoulder. It poised there an instant which seemed like an eternity to Laurette. But when it did crack, the bullet whizzing from its barrel sped straight. Pancho Sanchez, spinning around, fell to the ground. Then old Mart Sherlon started racing afoot down to where his sheep were blatting—with Laurette flying after him.

DWIGHT DENSLOW didn't notice their approach. Having stopped with bullets two of the four men, he was battling with fists the remaining person—tall, stoop-shouldered Droopy Collister. And how he was battling!

Time after time his ripping rights and lefts smashed to Collister's face and body. Then came that vicious crack to the jaw. Collister's head rocked back, his whole body, as he crumpled to the ground. Dwight grabbed him by the throat, jerked him to a sitting position.

"That's the third time I've had to knock you down in a week, you double-crossin' coyote!" he panted. "I give you a hundred dollars cash, and a job ridin' so you'll keep your damn mouth shut. Then you turn around and—"

"I'll tell plenty if you don't let me go!" Collister croaked. "Everybody in this country'll know I come up here huntin' Tommy Sherlon. I'll tell his sister! I'll tell—"

"Tell and be danged!" shouted old Mart Sherlon, hastening forward. He turned to Dwight. "What's this skunk ravin' about?"

"I—I guess he's let the cat outa the bag." Dwight evaded Laurette's blue eyes. "Collister come ridin' into my camp with a letter signed by Adam Hewett, the sheriff down in Sweet Water County. The letter said Tommy Sherlon had been stealin' horses. And Hewett was offerin' Droopy here a hundred dollars to round Tommy up. You see, Droopy figgered Tommy would probably hit for home and—"

"The dirty crook!" old Mart rasped. "And you handed him a hundred dollars just to shield Laurette. Keep her from findin' out that her brother was a horse thief! Huh! Why, Adam Hewett ain't been sheriff of Sweet Water since last year! He got kicked out for bein' a crook himself! Him and this skunk framed up that letter. And Tommy ain't in five hundred miles of that country. Me and Laurette had a letter from him last evenin'. Old Bill Hoskins fetched it by our camp. Tommy's homesteadin' up in Montana!"

Dwight moved menacingly toward Collister again. "I'm goin' to wring your crooked neck!"

"No!" pleaded the beaten man. "I'll tell the truth—now! I wanted a ridin' job with you. It was Burge Snell's idee. He knowed you'd pertect Laurette. He knowed you—you loved her."

"Burge Snell?" Laurette echoed.

"Yeah," Dwight drawled. "Him and this buzzard was workin' together, all right. And that Mex sheepherder your dad fired. They've been gettin' away with some of my best steers—and your fattest lambs. Take a look in Frozen Gulch over there while I hogtie this buzzard."

Curiously Laurette and her father walked over to the brink of Frozen Gulch, that ice-packed, miniature glacier below the corral into which their sheep had been driven.

"A natural packin' plant!" old Mart snorted. "Them crooks butcherin' beef and lambs—and packin' the meat in that ice there!"

"Right," said Dwight, coming up. "I hadn't thought of it before, but now I recall that Burge Snell's brother—the fourth man in this gang—owns a butcher shop down in Meridan. They've been haulin' the meat down the other side of the mountain. But they won't haul any more!"

"No wonder so many lambs turned up missin' while that Mex was herdin' for me," Mart said. "Too bad I didn't kill him 'stead of just woundin' him!"

"Burge Snell's purty bad hit, too," Dwight answered. "I wish you'd go take a look at him, Mart."

Laurette started to follow Sherlon, but Dwight caught her arm.

She looked up at him, her eyes suddenly brimming with tears. "I'm sorry for—for everything," she faltered. "To think you were putting up with that contemptible Droopy, just to shield my feelings!"

"I loved you," he said gently. "That explains a lot."

"You *did* love me?" She caught her breath sharply.

"I do," he corrected. "Here's your ring, little lady."

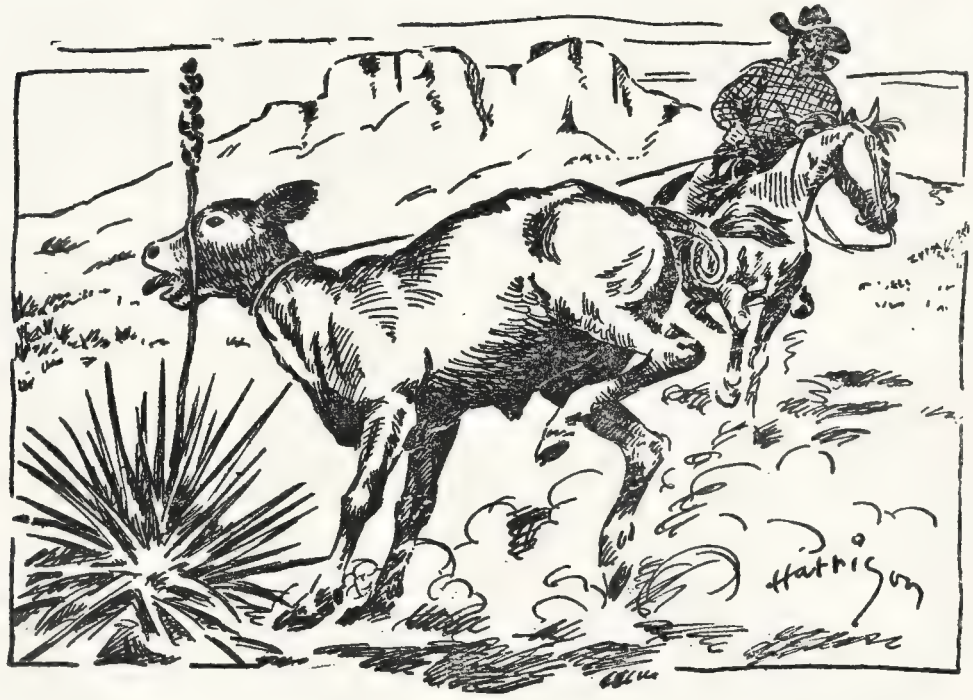
"Good! If you'll slip it on my finger. Once more, I promise never, never to give it back to you again."

"I was hopin' you'd say that!" He reached out, swept her into his arms.

They were still standing there, embracing, when old Mart came trudging back. He grinned broadly and whooped:

"Hey, kids! Much as I hate to interrupt you when you're so doggone busy, we didn't kill none of them skunks. They'll all pull through to spend a lot of time in jail." He chuckled softly. "And it looks like you two are goin' to spend a lot of happy days together. Which, now that the fog is clearin' away from the high range—and away from my eyes—suits me perfect!"

And Laurette murmured softly to Dwight: "Perfect!"



Lariat Rustles a Ride

The Pecca Basin rangeland rang with the wager of Patricia, lady boss of the Three X—and the trigger tigress, Lolita. A thousand dollars was the stake. But the payoff was made with guns—not gold. And tophand Lariat Carson was the Colt collector.

The girl whirled, eyes blazing.

By Anson Hard

LARIAT CARSON rode into the Pecca Basin country looking for a job and found a dead horse. "For a feller what's ridin' the grubline, that's shore goin' to be tough bait," mused Lariat with a grin.

The horse was lying at the edge of a prairie-dog town. He saw the broken foreleg and the bullet-hole between the steed's eyes. Yet he knew that a browsing range horse was not likely to step in a dog-hole unless it was being raced hell-bent across the rodent's town.

He whirled his smoky mustang and back-tracked upon the trail of the dead horse. On the far side of the prairie-dog town his smile became suddenly grim. "Two hombres chased that hoss smack-dab across them holes. For what?"

Curiosity was eating him like acid on a green hide. The dead steed had been magnificently built with a trace of thoroughbred along with mustang

toughness—a mount that would have both endurance and speed. Now it was dead, chased first across a dog-town and then finished with a bullet. It didn't make sense.

Crack! From beyond a mesquite ridge came the sharp, menacing detonation of a six-gun. Carson instinctively ducked, but there was no burr of lead in his direction. *Pow!* Once more the firing of the unseen gunman. "Gosh, hammerhead, are they shootin' more hosses? What kind of a country is this?"

He pressed his knees and eased the mustang in the direction of the firing. He chose a brushy spot where he could look down into the adjacent valley unobserved. His lean hand which had been reaching up to adjust his chin strap paused in mid-air.

"Pansy, my aunt!"

In the valley below, a girl stood, her back toward him, a smoking six-gun in her hand. Thirty paces from her was a ground-hitched pinto mare.

It was not the girl as much as it was the object of her shooting that attracted his attention. Draped on a dwarf mesquite bush was a womanish shirtwaist and above that, cunningly wound to resemble a head scarf, was a silk bandanna. From the distance this target gave a startling resemblance to another female.

Even as he watched, slightly agape, the girl jerked the six-gun up and fired. The target remained untouched, but a geyser of dust kicked on the opposite slope. The gunwoman fairly stamped her heel in vexation.

Lariat eased down the slope until he was ten paces behind the girl. His trained mustang followed, moving almost as silently as its master. The grin again spread his lips.

"Keep yore wrist straight when usin' so heavy a gun," he said. The girl whirled as if stabbed by a needle, eyes blazing. Larson knew better than to contest that snap in a woman's eye, and he felt for a moment as if he had coppered something. Yet he couldn't overlook the piquant attractiveness of her features, the clear, high-colored skin, the hair that dropped in perfect waves from beneath her hat. She was dressed in a mannish blouse, brown denims, and spurred boots. The masculine apparel served to accentuate rather than destroy the lines of her feminine figure.

"Who are you?"

Lariat awkwardly touched his hat. He wouldn't admit it, but this girl had him a little fussed.

"Well, miss, you might say I'm a Colt teacher passin' through. Seein' you practicin'—"

The gun in her hand lifted a little. "If you're one of Lolita's gang—"

Carson threw up a defensive hand. "No, ma'am, we ain't, an' we don't know Lolita. Is that Lolita over there on the bush?"

"I wish to heaven it was! I'd fill her so full of holes— It's none of your business what I'd do."

"Yes and no, ma'am, we'll see. Has this little shootin' jamboree got anything to do with that dead hoss over yonder in the dog-town?"

Anger carried her to words despite the fact that Carson was a stranger. "It certainly has. That was the only horse I had that could win the race tomorrow. I know two of her men chased him over that dog-town—only I can't prove it. She knows I wouldn't welch on that bet. I'll pay, but I'll settle with her—"

"Hold it, lady. You can't go into a gunfight feelin' mad. It shakes the nerves. Now, just lift yore gun the way I told you and see what happens."

IT was his infectious grin that carried the day. Even her rampant anger melted before it. She looked at him a moment, then down at the gun, changing it as he had directed. Without a word she turned, looked at the target, pointed her finger, and fired. The shirtwaist twitched upon the bush.

"Why, why, I did hit it. Thanks."

"No thanks, ma'am. Whatever I do,

I do for a price. As I said, I'm a Colt teacher. Five dollars a lesson for a series of lessons, and I throw in the first one free. That leaves us for the moment exactly even—"

The dawning friendship in her eyes faded. "So you're one of these smart ones, eh? Well, I don't like smart-alecks. There won't be any series of lessons, get it? You've nosed into my business without being asked. Now, get on your hammerhead and drift. I mean it, *drift!*"

"Yes, ma'am," said Lariat Carson meekly.

Once over the ridge and out of her sight, his fingers came up to scratch his chin. "Gosh, ain't she a clipper, hoss? She's done made a bet, an' somebody's ruined her only race hoss. Now she's goin' to plug a gal named Lolita in the shirtwaist. What kind of a country is this?"

Lariat Carson was quickly to learn. He came into the little town of Pecca Crossing after three hours on a dim trail. All the way his mind had been mulling the situation he had discovered, and his curiosity was lifting to the boiling point.

The cowtown strung along a rutted stage trail, its unpainted buildings divergent in shape and construction. He could see from the distance the two-storied Overland Hotel and beyond that the false fronts of shops and saloons. A sprawling livery barn and corral lay just to his right.

He swung in at the livery stable and turned the mustang over to an oldster who seemed to have no further conversational ability than, "Fifty cents a night, mister, oats an' hay."

Lariat knocked the dust from his hat and chaps and struck out along the planked walk. He turned in at a store to replenish his supply of "makin's." He was attracted by a new lass rope and bought it. From the adjacent building came the strident clamor of high-pitched conversation.

The white-haired proprietor cocked an eyebrow as he tilled Lariat's cash. "Sorta raisin' a little Ned over in Lolita's place. Gopherhole Burke come a-foggin' in twenty minutes ago. I shouldn't wonder they'd be trouble."

"Lolita's place?"

"Yeh. Stranger here, huh, or you'd know Lolita. She runs the biggest resort in town. And a swell looker even if she is Mex."

Carson was absorbing these facts with an interest unsuspected by the garrulous storekeeper. "And if she's such a nifty looker, why would the aforesaid Gopherhole Burke cause trouble?"

"You are a stranger, fur a fact. Everybody knows. Gopherhole rides fur Miss Patricia on the Three X, sorta foreman of her riders if she had any other riders which she ain't. She lives there with her mother, who's an invalid."

"You don't say. But that don't tell me what's smokin' up Gopherhole Burke."

"Why, the big race is tomorrow. Lolita bet Miss Pat a thousand dollars she can't win it. Miss Pat jest has to have the money to send her mother to a hospital. I dunno. They say Miss Pat has a purty good hoss. Anyway, it'll be fun. Miss Pat is purty much of a pepperbox herself."

Lariat's lips parted. He knew, better than the storekeeper did, why Gopherhole had come fogging into town. "What is this—an exclusive race between them two?"

"No, no, it's open. A little jamboree the ranches hold every year. Anybody can enter if he minds, ten dollars entrance fee and a hunnerd dollar purse to the winner. The money's made on the side bets. Lolita ain't even got a horse. She just bet Miss Pat she couldn't win."

THE clamor in the adjacent resort increased, rose to an alarming din. Lariat, his new rope coiled over his arm, stepped out upon the plank walk. At the same moment the swinging doors of Lolita's place

whanged around. Almost like a pip shot from a squeezed orange, a man volleyed outward to land flat upon his back on the heel-scarred planks!

The thrown man lay dazed for only one second. Then his hand pawed for his holster. Before the fallen man's fingers touched the blackened butt of his Colt, a detonation crashed from the interior of the resort. The unfortunate puncher was knocked flat once more as if driven downward by an invisible sledge.

Lariat Carson felt the nerves of his body stiffen. That shot from the inside had come too quickly. No man alive could have got a gun in action that soon after the fallen man had reached. The conclusion was damnable! The unseen gunner had drawn first, and the ejected puncher had pawed in self-defense.

The wounded man writhed upon the boardwalk, clawing at his chest. Blood began to ooze between his fingers.

The doors swung shut to open again almost instantly. A pair of hands, the biggest that Carson had ever seen, shoved them outward, followed by a man of like proportions. A great surly beast of a man with a look of malevolent cruelty on his features. And behind him—

Carson's eyes widened. He had expected Lolita to be a whizzer, but hardly this. She was tall, lithe and perfectly molded as a sleek well-cared-for beast. A mass of black curls tumbled from a silk scarf tied pirate-fashion on the back of her head. And these curls framed a face of such startling regularity that Carson thought he was seeing a lithographed work of art. Art, yes, a face cold and expressionless, and when she swept her black eyes in his direction an indefinable repulsion swept him. For all her amazing beauty he could read this woman as cruel and untrustworthy as a snake.

Like the big man with her, Lolita wore a holstered gun. Either of these two might have fired the cowardly shot and snicked the weapon into leather again. They stood staring down at the writhing puncher without the least compassion.

"Reckon that'll hold yuh," rumbled the big man. "Don't never come around here and say Lolita cheated!"

"And you can tell that welching female boss of yours," said Lolita in a voice as icy as it was clear, "that I'm expecting her after the race—and to bring her checkbook along."

Lariat Carson ambled forward. There was a peculiar white heat throbbing in his neck veins, but he maintained his pose of a harum-scarum, altogether harmless waddy.

"I'm beggin' yore pardon, folks, but this feller ain't able to tell nobody nothin'. Now, if yo're wantin' to hire a messenger, I ain't got no job—"

"You keep out of this!" The big man whirled on Lariat like a growling bear. Carson stepped back in assumed fright.

"Well, you can't leave him layin' here on the walk anyway, can you?" he stammered. "Reckon I'd be willin' for a price to carry him—"

"Roll him into the gutter. That's where dogs belong," crisped Lolita coolly and turned back into the resort. The big man let out a guffaw and followed her. Neither saw the quick change that came over the face of the strange rider on the boardwalk.

For once Lariat's lips were terrifically grim. His eyes slitted to flaming bars. Anger at this unnecessary violence and cruelty burned him like a branding iron. He stepped to the side of the now still form and gathered the wounded man in his arms.

"This man's hit purty bad. He'll have to have care. Where can I get him a room?" he questioned the storekeeper.

"Well, now, I dunno. There's the hotel, but the clerk wouldn't have him when he hears. You see, Lolita owns the hotel too."

"We got to take him somewhere.

What kind of a town is this when you can't bed down a wounded man?"

"The town's all right, stranger, only that crowd's got it buffaloed. You might bring him into my back room. I got a cot there."

"Okay. Grab some muslin off your shelves for bandages and fetch water. Get movin'."

Once Gopherhole's shirt was off, they saw the seriousness of the case. Lariat worked fast to pack the wound, but that would not be enough. "We got to get a doc," he declared tersely.

"Can't," retorted the storeman. "Doc Smedley went to Antelope an hour ago. Won't be back afore tomorrow afternoon."

"That's a break—a tough one!"

Gopherhole was completely in a coma now. Lariat had done all he could do, but this man needed medical skill and care. Inwardly cursing Lolita's crowd, Carson went to the rear door and looked out. The proprietor shook his head and went back to his counters.

Lariat stiffened like a pointer scenting game. A trim figure had come out of the rear door of the livery stable and was striding up the alley toward the back entrance to the resort.

"Goshamighty, Miss Pepperbox!"

HE could guess instantly her destination. She had ridden to town soon after himself, had left her mare at the stable, and was hoofing it up the back way to surprise Lolita. He saw Miss Pat pause once and draw her gun, triggering it with the second finger as he had showed her, take a quick point at a post, and then resheathe it.

"Holy wildcats!" breathed Lariat. "If she braces Lolita's gang I'll have me two patients."

He closed the door. In a moment she would be passing by. He had to do some tall thinking and do it quick. He seized the new cow-rope and shook out a loop.

Through the window he saw her pass chin up. He had to time his act perfectly. He threw the door open, took one step out to have sufficient room, and cast the loop. She was six paces beyond him when the rope drew taut.

Lariat guessed c o r r e c t l y—she didn't yell. But she fought like a sleepered calf. Hand over hand he pulled her into the door. Her eyes were shooting flames when she finally turned to see her captor.

"Why, you—"

"Easy, miss. There's a man on the bunk what needs quiet. I had to get you in here and get you quick."

"You insufferable fool—why, it's Gopherhole!"

The rounded surprise of her eyes effaced the anger. In a moment she was beside the bunk. A quick clicking of her lips expressed concern and pity. Yet suspicion would not down. She turned belligerently toward Lariat. "You—you did this?"

"No, ma'am, not me. Pluggin' a man don't come in my shootin' lessons. His friends next door sorta gave him a lead present."

"Lolita!"

"Well, maybe. There was also a grizzly bear in pants—"

"Ham Dunley! If he did it, it was Lolita's orders. He's just a paid bully—" She checked herself. "Gopherhole did this for me. He knew I was coming in. He was trying to take my fight on himself. He was an old hand of my father's, dandled me on his knee when I was a kid. Oh, we've got to save him, got to get the doctor."

"Can't. He's gone to Antelope. Back tomorrow." A scheme was beginning to form in the back of Lariat's mind, a risky one, but possible. He'd have to play it right.

"Someone must ride," demanded the girl. "Get the doctor back by midnight."

"Who?"

Perplexity furrowed her brow. "Nobody would ride for me. Ham Dunley would beat them up. Lolita hates me like a snake."

"Yeah, that makes it different. I was figurin' I might go, but—"

"But what?"

"I've seen this here Ham Dunley."

"Oh, afraid. I couldn't have expected more from *you.*" The accent on the last word was withering.

Lariat kept to his pose. "Yes, ma'am, but now if I was actually takin' orders—"

"What do you mean?"

"If I was ridin' for a brand, and my boss told me to go—well, I'd go."

She stood staring at him as if he were some strange and indescribable animal. "You mean I'd have to hire you to get you to go!"

"Er, yes, ma'am. You got the idea quick. As I said before I never do nothin' except for a price. Forty a month includin' my horse. In this case, payment in advance."

She seemed utterly stunned at such a proposal. When she did speak her words cut like flying icicles. "What kind of a yellow dog are you?"

Carson puffed in assumed indignation. "If that's the way you feel about it, I'll leave you—"

"No, no, wait. I'll do anything for Gopherhole. I'll hire you." Her hand reached for her pocket, then hesitated. "I'll write you a check, and if you don't get the doctor here I'll stop payment. You don't run any sandy on me."

Lariat only grinned. She called to the storekeeper for ink, and the pen fairly stabbed through the paper as she wrote. She slapped the folder down upon a store box and handed him the written slip. "There!"

"Thanks, boss." He pocketed the check. "When you hired me, you shore got yourself a good horse."

IT was one-twenty before Lariat clattered back into town with the medico. The trail to Antelope had been new, but he had rented a fresh mount from the liveryman to gain time.

The doctor and the girl went immediately to work, and the old storekeeper stood by with water and bandages. Lariat had the main room of the store to himself. Grinning covertly, he went behind the counter and began rummaging among the shelves.

Half an hour later he oozed into the back room unnoticed. The girl's checkbook still lay upon the box. Her gun was hanging from a peg. Lariat handled the checkbook a moment and put it down. The three about the cot were paying him little attention. He slipped out the girl's weapon, gave it a quick examination, and returned it to the holster. Still practically unnoticed, he left the room.

As he bedded down in the livery stable for the rest of the night, his grin was particularly broad.

The next day Pecca Crossing took on the air of a frontier festival. Riders from a dozen ranches spurred into town. Buckboards and farm wagons bracketed the saddle horses along the hitchracks. Hilarity in Lolita's place and in the smaller saloon down the street was continuous. Side bets were made and covered with alacrity. The community was building itself up for the annual event.

When the dozen contestants lined up at the starting point in the main street there was an inconspicuous rider, mounted on a grayish mustang at the far end of the line. He drew little comment. "Jest a driftin' waddy what thinks his horse kin run," chortled a mustached rancher. "Wal, he'll soon find out."

The race was to a point a mile from town, around a lone hackberry tree, and back to the starting point. Three judges were stationed at the tree to see that each contestant circled the halfway mark.

Lariat knew that a two-mile heat, at a dead run, was a hard race for any horse. Endurance, more than speed, would count. As his eyes followed along the line of steeds, his brow furrowed. Some pretty good horses here. His whole scheme depended upon winning the race, and if

he lost—well, he would more or less have coppered the rest of his life.

At the crack of a gun the whole line started forward like a cavvy through a broken wall. Lariat pulled in his own mount. "Broomtail, for the first time in yore life, you're goin' to eat dust. Just keep on their tails, but let 'em go."

The shouts and huzzahs of the spectators died behind them. The racers strung out into an uneven line. A roan gelding surged to the front, hammering, belly flat, at a killing pace. Quirts slapped as others tried to overtake the leader. At the halfway tree Lariat Carson was two hundred yards behind and not in the race at all. One of the judges haw-hawed him roundly.

With the home stretch in view Lariat leaned a little over the horn. The gap between himself and the others was slowly eaten down. In half a mile he was fifty yards from the trailers. In another quarter the mustang was nosing into the bunch. At the front the roan gelding, breathing hard, held the lead by twice his length.

Then Lariat played his trump. He reached down and unleased the latigo. He eased himself forward until the leather slipped beneath him. The forty-pound stock saddle slithered over the mustang's haunches, and dropped to the ground.

"Now, you hammerhead, go!"

THE easing of weight was like a spur to the mouse-colored horse. His legs were a drumming blur in the dust. The last spurt of effort, that Lariat had been saving the mustang for, carried them halfway to the front. The faithful pony was lying down to it now, neck outthrust, his whole whipcord body blended into coordinated movement. Shouts from partisan spectators raised in a hubbub.

Fifth, fourth, third, second, the mustang was inching himself forward. As they breasted the livery stable with a hundred yards yet to go, the mustang's nose was even with the roan's rump. Shouts of the roan's backers were a drowning clamor.

Lariat, for the first time in the race, touched his spurs into the flanks. The faithful mustang put his last ounce of speed into the final dash. Carson saw the roan's rider drop abreast and then fall back. The mustang pounded, half a length ahead, across the finish mark.

Lariat slowed and swung his pony, an unprepossessing victor. Aside from the unexpected finish, he aroused little notice. As the bets were for individual horses beating other individual horses, it was of small moment that the purse went to an unknown waddy.

Yet over the backs of the milling spectators Lariat saw one thing. He saw Miss Pat come out of the store and head into Lolita's place. The edge of her checkbook showed above the rim of her shirt pocket, and *her gun was buckled on!*

Lariat slipped to the ground, slapped the mustang in among the tied ponies, and raced for the big resort. The veins in Carson's throat were twitching slightly as he shoved through the crowd. He saw Miss Pat twenty feet ahead as she strode to the far end of the bar where Lolita and Ham Dudley stood. The big man was a mass of arrogant pride, but Lolita's face was coldly implacable. As on the day before, both wore guns.

Miss Pat stopped two paces in front of her enemy. "I've come to see you, Lolita. I'm ready for the payoff."

Lariat shoved aside the last of the blocking spectators. "Hold on a minute. As rider of the winning horse, I've something to say."

Ham's big head bobbed forward. "You ain't buttin' in—"

"Keep out of this yourself, Dunley!" Something in Lariat's voice stayed the big man. He shifted and glowered, uncertain. His boss had given him no orders concerning this stranger.

Lariat turned toward the sleek, perfumed owner of the resort. "As I understand it, when a bet's made, both sides should be able to post the money. This lady has her checkbook in her pocket. But I don't see any evidence to pay on the other side—in case they lost."

Lolita gave him a look that was purely contemptuous. "That isn't necessary. I didn't lose. But if you think I haven't the cash—" She gave a signal to the bartender. The man slapped a flat bundle of currency on the bar. "There. But what of it? She gives me her check—"

Lariat's voice rang out to the far corners of the room. "She don't give you nothin'. I rode the horse that won the race. Not only am I in the employ of Miss Pat, but the horse that won the race belongs to Miss Pat!"

"That's a lie! This is some dirty frame—"

"Careful, woman! Don't be usin' them words without evidence." He reached over and jerked the checkbook from the girl's pocket. So fast had he carried the verbal battle that Miss Pat stood confused, incapable of interposing a word.

He shook out a folded paper from among the blanks. "Right here's a bill of sale in her possession, for that horse. I slipped it into her checkbook so she wouldn't lose it. And if that ain't evidence enough, here's something else." He displayed the check. "Here's the payment she made me yesterday, a check signed by herself, as she'll testify. Forty bucks. A high price for a range mustang, but he's worth it."

Miss Pat turned upon her new hand. An incredible look was in her eyes. "Is that what you meant when you said I was getting a good horse?"

"Exactly. Them two papers absolutely prove she owned the horse. I leave it to any man in the barroom. Now, Miss Pat, collect yore winnin's and let's get out of this doghouse."

ALL the veneer of the polished Lolita dropped from her. Rage and frustration stripped her to the termagant that she really was. "Don't you dare touch that money, you snide! You framed it with this stranger to trick me, and I was betting honest—"

"Honest!" The word snapped from Miss Pat's lips like a hurled missile. "You, honest, when your hired riders ruined my horse and I had to kill him? You, honest, when you shoot a man that's lying flat on his back? You're the lowest, vilest thing that ever wore skirts! I'm ashamed of my sex when I look at you!"

"You can't talk like that—" Lolita's hand dived for her gun.

Lariat Carson for the moment went cold. Would the girl remember the gun savvy he had taught her? Yet, between two women, he could not interfere.

The gun in the ranch girl's hand spat a yard-long flame. Lolita, her own gun half drawn, uttered a piercing scream, her left hand clutching at her breast. Then her face drained completely of color and she sank back against the bar, slipping to the floor.

Ham Dunley's roar tore through the building. He pawed for his holster.

Lariat Carson's hand seemed scarcely to move, yet his weapon was out, spitting. Dunley's hand was slapped back by invisible power. His weapon thudded to the floor. He clutched at his crunched fist, bafflement in his dull eyes.

"That'll ruin yore gun-hand for all time, Dunley, but you ain't goin' to need it no more. The sooner you get out of Pecca Basin the better."

Lariat whirled toward the girl who stood staring in awesome horror at the woman she had shot. He saw the color go from Miss Pat's face, and he gathered her in his arms. Pausing only to sweep the money from the bar, he strode out. The crowd parted wordlessly before him.

On the counter of the store the girl

recovered. Lariat was bathing her forehead with water. She stared for seconds confused, then memory of what had happened started her up wild-eyed.

"I killed her! I killed a woman! O merciful heaven, I must have been mad. I couldn't have done such a thing."

"Now just compose yourself. Take a sip of this water. If you want to know the truth, you ain't killed nobody."

"What? But I did!"

"No, just punctured her skin, stung her a little. Bein' a coward at heart, she flopped in a faint. Anybody could pick the lead outa Lolita with a toothpick."

Lariat took the girl's gun, and before her widened eyes prodded out a cartridge. The bullet shoved to pieces before his thumbnail. "Soap! And behind the soap were just six tiny little bird-shot."

"You—you fixed my gun?"

"Yes, ma'am. I had the run of the store last night and helped myself. When you wasn't lookin' I sorta changed yore ammunition."

"Thank heaven for that. But why did you do it?"

"Well, I sorta had you figured. You wouldn't want to go down to yore grave knowin' you'd killed another human bein', now would you?"

"No. But you've done all this, saved me from awful trouble, won me the race. Why?"

"Lady, you think you hired me when I rode for the doc. You didn't. I been workin' for you ever since I seen you in the mesquite hollow. I reckon nobody ever made love to a woman the way I done. But, Miss Pat, I can't ever think about any girl but you. I hope you won't fire me."

"Fire you?" The girl's animation had returned and there was a soft light in her eyes. "I couldn't fire you. With this money I've got to get mother to the hospital and get her there quick. Poor old Gopherhole won't be able to work for months. Somebody's got to take care of the stock. You'll have to cook for yourself—"

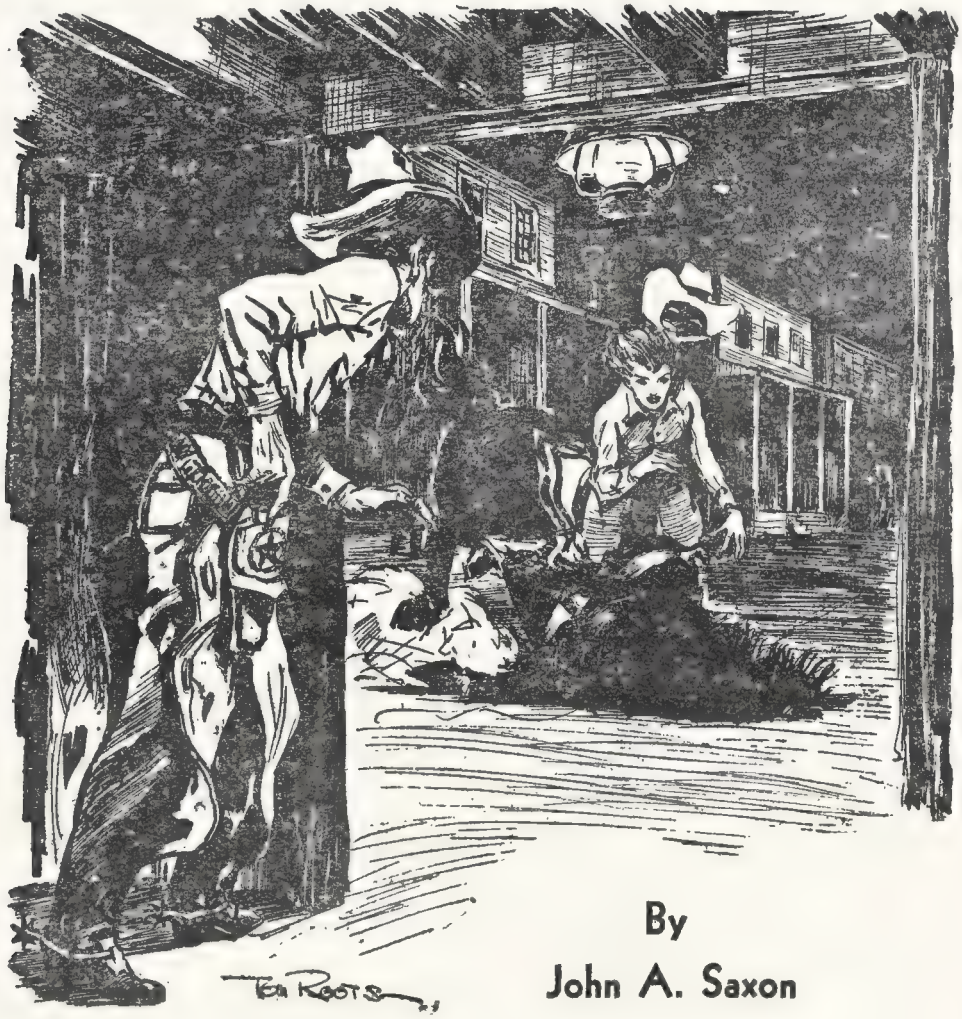
"What, get my own bait?"

"Until I get back from the hospital. Then, heaven help you, if you don't like my cooking."

"Well," drawled Lariat, "I reckon I kin get used to it. Most husbands has to."

Spur-Fanged Spitfire

Bob Brundage knew plenty about cattle, cayuses and Colts. But he didn't savvy what it took to be a tophand tamer of a spur-fanged spitfire.



By

John A. Saxon

MYRA ADAIR, her heels braced, the reins of the bridle twisted over her left hip as she held the fractious horse, made a picture. Her hat was hanging by the throat latch, her slim legs were encased in snug fitting foxed California cloth pants. The soft silk blouse revealed graceful curves. She was twenty, small, and blonde.

But Myra, back home on the Rocking A spread after two years at school, wasn't thinking about what sort of a picture she made at the moment. She was thinking how darned cantankerous a horse could get in a year by not being ridden. Maybe she shouldn't have left orders for the animal not to be forked.

What she did not know, was that big Bob Brundage, a new hand on the spread, was sitting on his sorrel horse behind the willows, watching her. Thoroughly exasperated, Myra grabbed the quirt hanging on her right wrist and then—

"Hey! Wait a minute, little lady," she heard someone say, and turned to face Brundage. "Ain't yuh forgettin' somethin'? He ain't been rid for nearly two years they say an'—"

He was perhaps fifty feet away.

Myra Adair had learned a lot about men in the two years she had been away. And she thought she could appraise them quickly. She did it in a flash—and for once, guessed wrong.

"And aren't you forgetting something?" she snapped back at him. "To mind your own business? This is my horse and I'll teach him—"

"Not that way, you won't, ma'am," said the cowboy, grinning indulgently. "You see you—"

With the pressure off the reins, Dynamite stood quietly enough, black eyes flashing, nostrils distended, ears flat—but quiet.

Myra Adair stopped struggling with the horse for a moment to take a second glance at this man. He was twenty-two or three, she judged, black-haired, dark-eyed. Probably one of the new men her father had hired while she was away. He met her eyes coolly. And for the first time in her life Myra felt a little fussed under the cool, steady gaze of the stranger.

"My name's Bob Brundage," he offered, with a friendly smile. "I guess you must be Miss Myra Adair. Yore dad an' mine used to ride trail together. That's how I happen to be here."

"How interesting," she said a little sarcastically, and was immediately sorry when she saw the quick hurt that swept over his face. After all, she decided, he was nice enough—if he just hadn't assumed to tell her how to handle her own horse.

"If I can help you," he suggested, and stopped short when she made it perfectly plain that that was about the worst thing he could have said.

"Thank you," she clipped. "I can handle this horse without any—"

"Look out!" he yelled as Dynamite reared, struck with its forefeet.

The black was a devil. Myra knew it and so did everybody else on the ranch. It was her particular pride that she alone could handle the animal. She tried to step out of the way, partially succeeded. Then she felt the weight of the horse's hoof as it grazed her shoulder, felt an instant searing pain.

The girl seemed only semi-conscious of the fact that Bob Brundage had fed iron to his horse, snaked out a rope, was moving in. She had fallen to the ground, lain there, stunned.

Dynamite moved off, halted, then plunged toward the prostrate girl. She heard the whir of the rope in Bob Brundage's hand, saw the blazing orbs of her own horse as it moved toward her, shut her eyes.

The throw, she knew, was perfect, but the angle was bad. Although she was in imminent danger she sensed what was going to happen, cried out against it. The sorrel set iself for the bust. Myra saw the quick dally Bob made around the horn of his saddle as the animal squatted. If the black turned the least bit—

It did and there was a crunching sound as the horse went to the ground, lay perfectly still with a broken neck.

"Oh!" she cried in dismay, forgetting her own hurt. "You've killed my horse—"

Bob Brundage was out of his saddle, coming toward her.

"He might have killed you," he answered her, and she knew that he was a little angry with her for having put herself into such a position.

PERHAPS it was that she sensed the feeling that was so near the surface with this man who seemed so completely in control of himself and the situation. Perhaps it was that she was a little angry with herself for having done something that she knew better than to do—give the horse an opportunity to strike at her.

Before he could reach her she got to her feet, conscious of a terrific pain in her shoulder.

"I'm all right," she said quickly, a little too flustered to acknowledge the correctness of his surmise. "If you will—"

She wasn't all right, and she knew it. The blow from the horse's hoof had been harder than she realized. Suddenly, and without warning, her knees gave way. She went to the ground again, closed her eyes. Myra Adair wasn't the fainting kind, and she didn't faint now, but she was close to it. Color drained from her face. She felt terribly weak. Some how, however, she was conscious of the fact that he had picked her up, was holding her in his arms like a child.

"Poor kid," she heard him whisper softly. "Just a baby—an' tryin' to be a bronc peeler with a mad devil like that black. Hank Adair ought tuh have more sense—"

He didn't waste much time soliloquizing what Hank Adair, Myra's father, should have done. For his quickly questing hands discovered that her shoulder was dislocated. Bob Brundage didn't stand on ceremony, and Myra subconsciously winced as he ripped the silk blouse from wrist to shoulder. He pulled off his hat, wadded it and placed it in her armpit and exerted pressure on her elbow.

She couldn't have opened her eyes then if she had wanted to. The pain was too intense. It may have been that for a moment or two she did lose consciousness. Then she realized that her arm felt better, that he was holding her head and shoulders in his lap, rubbing the strained muscles.

"Sorry to hurt yuh, honey," he said softly, as though in the belief she couldn't hear. "But it'll be all right when you wake up."

Then his lips brushed hers ever so gently. He placed her flat on the ground and pulled her arms down straight at her sides. Myra didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. Her arm hurt, but somehow the situation made her want to laugh. A cowboy Romeo! She'd always made fun of girls who fell in love with the hired hands. Of course *she* wasn't in love, but—

Well, he'd never have the satisfaction of knowing that she knew he had kissed her. Then all of a sudden she found herself wondering why she was not angry. She should have been, she thought.

Myra's "coming to" was a work of art. It ceased to be such, however, when she looked over Bob's shoulder. There was her brother Jack sitting on his horse a few yards away, his elbow on the horn of his saddle, a questioning look in his eyes. She wondered how long he had been there and how much he had seen. She decided not to notice him until she found out.

Myra was on her feet now, with Bob's assistance. She was very austere, very dignified.

"I'll use your horse to ride in on," she announced calmly. "I'm all right now, thank you."

Darn it. She wished she knew just how much Jack had seen. He would probably tease the life out of her about it.

"Sorry ma'am," said Brundage. "I can't let you ride my hoss. He jest natch'ly don't like women folks."

Young Jack Adair spurred in, dismounted.

"You heard what my sister said, Brundage," he said in clipped tones. "While you're workin' on the Rocking

A, you'd better do what you're told to do."

Bob Brundage looked the other over from the tip of his fine leathered Justins to the white Stetson that topped his black hair. Myra saw the color leave his face, return slowly.

"Sorry, mister," replied Bob, without raising his voice, "but that hoss don't carry the Rocking A brand—an' neither do I."

"I don't like your lip, Brundage," said Jack Adair truculently. "And furthermore, when my father hears about you and Myra—"

He looked at Myra with a peculiar expression. Right then and there Myra had the answer to the question as to how much of what had happened had been seen by her brother. He must have seen it all. But Jack Adair wasn't through.

"And your carryin's on," he added, and seemed about to say more when—

Crack! Bob's hard fist contacted Jack Adair's chin.

"You may be Hank Adair's son, an' Miss Myra may be your sister. But you can't say anything like that an' get away with it," he said.

DESPITE the fact that Jack Adair was her own brother, Myra didn't feel a bit badly about his being knocked down. In fact, she rather thought Jack had it coming to him.

"You're fired," snapped Jack Adair, getting to his feet but showing no inclination to return the blow.

"Nope," replied the other calmly. "As soon as I get to the big house, I'll quit. Your father hired me. He'll have to fire me—if I'm fired."

He picked up the bridle reins of Adair's horse.

"I'll be borrowing yore hoss, Adair," he announced.

And with no more ado, he picked up Myra bodily. Placing her in the saddle of Jack Adair's mount, Brundage took the reins in his left hand. He mounted his own horse, led the girl away, leaving Jack Adair flat-footed. And the only thing Myra did was to look at her brother and pull down her left eyelid.

Halfway to the house Bob said to Myra: "Yore brother's a pretty salty young gent. It seems to run in the family. If half the things I've heard about him are true, he needs a good lickin'."

Ordinarily Myra would have stuck up for Jack. But somehow Bob Brundage seemed to upset all the things she ordinarily would have done. After all, the remark was probably justified. She and Jack had been allowed to do pretty much as they pleased. Of course, she couldn't tell him she thought so.

"You're really going to quit, are you?" she asked finally, to bridge the gap.

"I'd rather quit than be fired. After all, a puncher can't go round sockin' the boss' son—not an' get away with it."

Myra seemed interested in the distant hills.

"No, I suppose not," she agreed, wondering what his reaction would be to a statement by her concerning punchers kissing the boss' daughter.

"I wish you wouldn't quit," she said at last. "Jack isn't bad. He's just gotten himself mixed up with gambler Ed Kitrelle, drinking a lot and losing—if dad finds out he'll be furious."

Bob grunted inaudibly before he said: "Hank's let you youngsters acquire the habit of doing about what you please, that's the trouble."

It was on the tip of her tongue to return the statement in kind. She had particularly in mind what had happened a short time before, but she managed not to.

What she did say was: "Well, perhaps after all, you *should* quit."

And, scorning his assistance, Myra slid out of the saddle and went into the house. Not, however, before she had heard Bob Brundage say: "Well, now what do you know about that?"

Which simple little remark was enough to make Myra throw herself angrily on the bed in her room.

She didn't stay there very long, however, for within half an hour she heard Bob and her father talking in the living room. A glance outside showed Bob's packed warbag on his horse. He had, then, decided to quit after all. For a moment, Myra wished she had been able to bridle her tougue.

"Myra's as high strung an' as temperamental as that black hoss she was ridin'," her father said. "Some day some man will be able to handle her and then—"

Well, she liked that. Her own father comparing her to a horse.

"Slick Hale wants you to take the buckboard an' come up to the north line camp," Myra heard Bob say.

Hank Adair snorted. "Ain't goin' to do it," he cut back. "I hired him as a foreman. If he can't run the spread without callin' on me every day or two, I'll get somebody who will."

Bob must have been angry, Myra decided, to say what he said next.

"Why don't you turn it over to those two kids of yours, Hank?" he asked shortly. "They'd be able to boss the place plenty. Now you can give me my time, I'm driftin'."

"Quittin', eh?"

"Nope. Fired. Jack gave me my walkin' papers, because I—"

She wondered if he would stop when he got that far. He did.

"Who the hell is runnin' this place, me or Jack?" demanded Adair.

Bob shrugged his shoulders.

"If I didn't have this damn rheumatiz," her father said. "I'd show them kids—"

He looked at Brundage calculatingly for a moment, then he said: "I'm an old man, Bob." Somehow a lot of the fire and gruffness was gone from his voice. "I can't get around like I used to, an' there's no use kiddin' myself. Them children of mine are gettin' out of hand. Young Jack is goin' to the devil a-whoopin' an' Myra —well, Myra is like her mother, Bob. She needs a steady hand on the bit—"

DARN it, thought Myra, why did her dad have to talk that way—and to Bob Brundage, of all people. It seemed almost as though her father were suggesting that Bob take her in hand. Well, if he tried *that* she'd show him a thing or two.

Her father went on: "Young Jack is gettin' hisself pretty deep with Ed Kitrelle, that tinhorn gambler that runs the saloon in Lancaster. He thinks that I don't savvy what's goin' on, but I do. He thinks I don't know what him an' Slick Hale are up to—runnin' my cattle over to Rock Springs, sellin' 'em to the construction camps an' gamblin' away the money to Kitrelle. Well, I do know it. The hell of it is I don't know just what to do about it."

Myra caught her breath. Her brother Jack, a thief! It was unbelievable. And that tinhorn gambler, Ed Kitrelle. Why, once Ed Kitrelle had said—

The girl blushed as she thought of it. Myra had always exerted a strong influence over Jack, and felt that she still could. She had been away. He had gotten out of hand.

"Brundage," Hank Adair said, "I've been keepin' an eye on you. You know cattle—horses—an' people. Jus' like yore father. How'd you like to take over Slick Hale's job an' run the Rocking A?"

"I'm afraid yore son an' daughter wouldn't stand for it, Hank," she heard Bob say.

"I said 'run the spread,' " her father repeated, "an' that means everybody on it'll take orders from you or—"

Myra flared. They didn't need any outside help in handling the Adair ranch or the Adair family. What *was* her father thinking of? Well, she'd get hold of Jack, get things in hand, and then she'd take care of Mr. Bob Brundage.

Bob looked out the window, said: "I'll do it, Hank—tomorrow. Young Jack just left for town. I reckon I've got a little business myself in Lancaster. I'll be seein' yuh."

Through her own window Myra watched him toss his bedroll back into the bunkhouse, start tightening the saddle cinches on the sorrel. Well, she knew a short cut. She hadn't been born and raised on the Rocking A without knowing how to beat a practical stranger into town.

Myra started changing her clothes, putting on some faded levis, and a flannel shirt. She topped off the outfit with a sombrero that was weather-stained, limp.

It was eight o'clock before she got to Lancaster. She hoped that she would be able to contact Jack before— Wait a minute. She had a better plan. If Ed Kitrelle was the man who was getting young Jack into all the trouble, then Ed Kitrelle was the man she should deal with. Once a plan of action had been formulated in Myra's mind, putting it into operation followed as a matter of course.

She avoided being seen in town, hitched her horse in front of the Lancaster general store, which was closed for the night. Then she slipped around through a back way to the saloon and gambling house operated by Ed Kitrelle. No halfway measures with Myra Adair. You couldn't handle pitch, was her creed, without going where the pitch was. There was an open window near the rear of the saloon, a light burning in a hallway, and at the end, a door marked "Office." She had to see Ed Kitrelle, and to see him she had to go where he was —and she went.

Climbing the sill, she walked down to the end of the hall and pushed open the door. Ed Kitrelle was sitting at his desk, counting silver from the crap table. He looked up as she entered.

"Well," he said, as his jaw dropped, "this is an unexpected pleasure, Miss Myra."

He placed a chair for her, motioned for her to sit down.

"It's no pleasure, Mr. Kitrelle," she snapped, ignoring the proffered chair. "I came to see you about my brother. Father knows about those cattle that you and Jack have been running over to Rock Springs. Not only that, but he intends to do something about it —unless—"

ED KITRELLE'S eyes narrowed. The implication was plain enough, but he waited. There were heavy footsteps in the hall, a fist banged on the door, and Myra's heart went to her toes. Bob Brundage!

"Open up, Kitrelle," he ordered. "I want a confab with yuh."

What would Bob think, finding her here? Her pulses pounded badly. "Quick," she whispered to Kitrelle. "I can't be seen here—"

"Shore not, little lady," smiled the gambler oilily. "I'll get rid of this jasper an' then you an' me'll talk."

Somehow Myra sensed that what the gambler had in mind to talk about was entirely apart from the reason that had brought her into the place. There was a closet in the corner of the room. He shoved her into it, closed the door. Myra's breath nearly stopped when she heard him turn the key in the lock and then remove it. She was trapped. Bob banged on the door again.

"Don't get panicky," said the gambler, settling his frock coat and easing a holstered gun further forward.

Observing the move through the keyhole, Myra wished she could do something to warn Bob without disclosing her presence. Oh, she had been a fool, she readily admitted to herself now, trying to stick her fingers into a thing that should be handled by a man. She might have known Ed Kitrelle would misinterpret the reason for her visit.

"Well," Kitrelle said, as Bob Brundage came into the room, "what's on yore mind?"

Bob looked around curiously.

"Thought I heard yuh talkin'," he clipped, "an' to a woman—"

"Yuh thought wrong," cut back the

gambler. "Even if I was, what the hell business is it of yours?"

It seemed to Myra that Bob could see straight through the keyhole of the locked door.

"You an' yore women don't interest me," admitted Bob, and Myra winced. "I came here to talk about that Adair kid, an' I'd rather talk to you both at once. Send for him. Rick Taylor is skinnin' him out of his eyeteeth on that crooked roulette wheel. An' there won't be any fifty head turned over tomorrow to pay off. Send for him."

For a moment their eyes locked, then the gambler opened the door, called: "Lefty! Send Jack Adair here. I want to talk to him."

A minute later, Brundage stood back of the door, as Jack Adair came into the room. He had let the boy walk in without suspecting that he was there, at least until Jack said:

"Now look, Ed, what's the idea of botherin' me, when I'm playin'? Everything is all set. Slick will take fifty head to Rock Springs tomorrow an' I'll pay you—"

That was where Bob Brundage stepped into the picture.

"It might have been all set, Jack," he said, in clipped tones. "But the deal is off. Your father knows what you and Slick have been up to. He's willin' to let the whole thing drop, providin' Ed Kitrelle closes up and gets out of town."

Kitrelle laughed sneeringly. "What the hell do you take me for, Brundage?" he cut in. "You can't prove anything. Neither can Hank Adair."

Myra thought she had never heard so much ice in a man's voice as was in that of Bob Brundage as he said: "We wasn't even thinkin' of provin' anything, *Keno!*"

The gambler's face blanched.

"But mebby the sheriff uh Clovis County'd be interested to know whatever became of the man that killed Randy Clark uh couple of years ago."

Myra couldn't see what happened then, but she heard it. There was a sound of quick movement, a shot, her brother's voice, a crash, the smell of smoke—

"The lamp," said Jack tightly. "The place is afire!"

"Get out!" ordered Bob.

"But you can't leave Kitrelle—"

"He's dead. I'll carry his body outside. There'll be trouble, explanations. Get out of here and get back to the ranch. Quick! Out the back way before they investigate."

MYRA heard her brother go out, heard Bob Brundage moving. She tried to scream, but her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. She pounded on the door. Would he hear her?

"Bob! Bob!" she managed at last.

The crackle of the flames was her only answer.

"Stand away from the door," she finally heard him say, and his burly shoulder banged through the paneling.

Then she was in his arms. His coat was around her head to protect her from the fire, and an instant later they were outside. In the street in front of the saloon all was confusion. Already the flames had spread to the front of the wooden building. He put her on her feet, held her tight, pressed his lips to hers.

"Darling," he said hoarsely, "are you all right? I knew you were there. You dropped your quirt when you came in. I kicked it under the desk so that Jack wouldn't see it. I didn't want him to know you were calling —on Kitrelle."

"I—I'm all right," Myra said a little uncertainly. She was a little breathless by the rapidity of developments—and the fact that Bob's kiss had been of an entirely different caliber from the one earlier in the day.

"Then take my horse over there," he pointed. "If he fights you—much as I love him—I'll kill him." There was a strange fierceness in his voice.

"I'm trustin' him with the dearest thing in the world."

"My horse is in front of the general store, Bob," she whispered. "I'll —be waiting. And please be careful—"

Men were boiling out of other places in the vicinity, a bucket brigade was being formed, but it was too late. The gambling house was doomed. . . .

Hank Adair sat in his armchair early the next morning, a grumpy look on his dour face.

"Myra," he said as his daughter came in, "I'm makin' some changes around here. I ain't been satisfied with the way things been goin'."

"Really, father?" she asked, and then wrinkled her nose at him when he stared at her.

"Doggone it, I wish you kids would be serious," he said complainingly. "Where's Jack?"

"Right here, dad," said young Jack coming in off the porch. "I was just watching that new man Bob Brundage ropin' out his horse. He seems to be pretty much of a tophand."

Hank Adair was annoyed. What had come over these two anyway?

"Well, call him, dammit," he ordered testily. "I want him here for breakfast. He's goin' to be the new foreman."

Bob Brundage came in, pulling off his hat. Seemingly he was very much unconcerned as he looked at Myra standing in the doorway of the kitchen.

"That's providin' you an' Myra have no objections," Hank Adair added in a tone that was meant to be rebukingly sarcastic.

"Not me, dad," said young Jack, knowing full well that Bob didn't know what had gone before.

"I fired Slick this mornin'," continued Hank. "He's been losin' too much stock."

"Breakfast's ready, dad," said Myra from the doorway. "Come an' get it or I'll throw it away—"

Hank Adair's jaw dropped. "Myra Adair," he snapped, "I didn't know you could cook. You must have learned lately."

"There's a lot of things I've learned lately, dad," she said to her father, looking straight at Bob Brundage.

Then she turned away toward the kitchen, followed by her brother Jack.

"Have any luck in town, Bob?" asked Hank Adair, rolling his wheeled chair toward the dining room.

Bob's eyelid went down in a solemn wink. "Well, what do you think, Hank?" he replied.

But Hank Adair, looking out over the broad expanse of his Rocking A spread with slightly misty eyes, kept his thoughts to himself.

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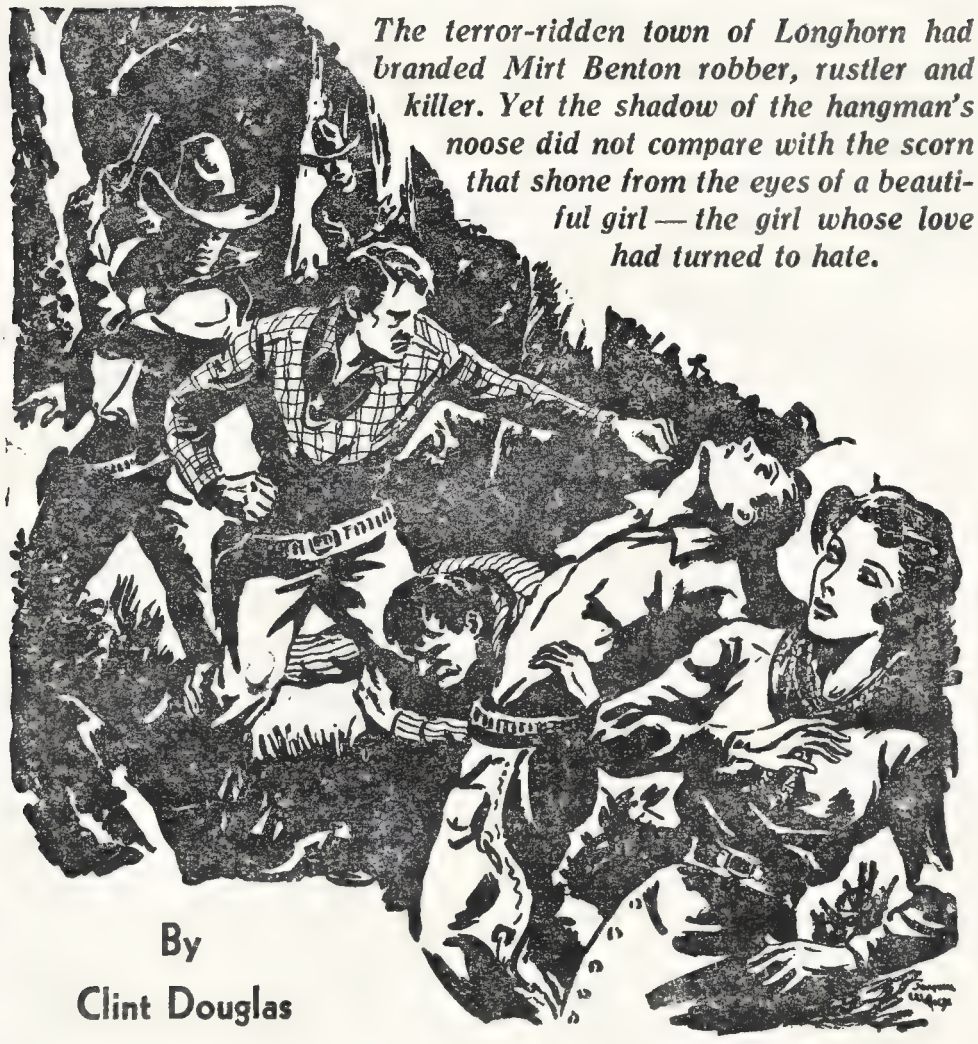


The terror-ridden town of Longhorn had branded Mirt Benton robber, rustler and killer. Yet the shadow of the hangman's noose did not compare with the scorn that shone from the eyes of a beautiful girl — the girl whose love had turned to hate.

By

Clint Douglas

MIRT BENTON'S grin was hopeful as he kneed his sorrel along the road that curled through the cedar swamp toward Longhorn. He hitched his cartridge belt in the nervous way he had, rubbed his jaw and peered with sharp anticipation up the trail of velvet dust.

Ellen Costain might appear any minute now. She must have gone to town, for Mirt's stop at the Flying C had showed her home deserted. But he would meet her in Longhorn or on her way back. He sure hoped his homecoming would surprise Mike Costain's daughter the way Mirt wanted.

Ten months helping out a sick uncle down in Arizona had seemed long, but he had been able to save most of his wages. Benton could buy

a few steers now and maybe rent a stretch of watered grass. What with those cows he had run for himself while he worked on the Crazy K over east, he would be a cattleman shortly. Which meant that with luck, only half a year hence he could put a certain little question to Ellen.

He chuckled with anticipation. "Question ain't big, but it's sure got plenty importance!"

Thought of Latigo Scandrett, foreman for Ellen's father, made his grin cool slowly to troubled doubt. What progress had Scandrett made with that brownhaired girl while Mirt was away? Latigo was persistent—too much so. And he had a sort of persuasion about him that Mirt feared he himself lacked. Suppose Scandrett and Ellen were—

He shook his head, frowning. That and one other matter sort of marred his return to the county. Benton's hand rose to rub his square chin as he thought about Stud. He had left the black horse with Hank Barron. But two hours ago Hank had admitted the stallion was missing. Mirt wanted the feel of Stud between his knees again; there wasn't another horse with his speed in fifty miles.

Of a sudden the cowboy reined in. Across the swampy land in a horseshoe twist of the road, he glimpsed an oncoming rider. And Mirt could not be mistaken about that white sombrero, the pongee blouse—even the spotted pony. It was Ellen Costain, coming from Longhorn.

Benton jockeyed the sorrel to shade at the edge of the road. Ellen rounded the turn and came along until suddenly Mirt spurred straight across her path. She uttered a startled gasp and brought her pony up short, thrusting back the white sombrero as it slouched a little forward and obstructed her view.

"Howdy, ma'am!" Benton laughed. "Aren't you Ellen Costain? Want to make talk with—"

"Mirt Benton!" The girl's hand flew to her throat. "Oh, you—! Let me pass! Don't you block my way!" Ellen blazed angrily.

His jaw sagged. In sheer amazement Mirt watched her heel the spotted pony to the left and start around him. Then impulse made him thrust his horse in her path a second time. "Hey! Hold on, Ellen! I —"

She whirled her mount to dart back the opposite side. In a half-dazed way Mirt realized this was no game, that she really ardently wanted to elude him. Resentment flared in his breast and he leaned far out of the saddle. His fingers caught a flying rein as her startled pony wheeled and reared. Ellen's dark eyes flashed. Instantly she backed the horse with a terrific jerk on his arm. It was a tug of war, fiercely contested.

"Let go! Let go at once, Mirt Benton, or I—I'll quirt you!"

He saw her hand sweep up holding the braided rawhide. He could not seem to think fast enough to comprehend all this. Ellen leaned over, threatening to strike him.

"Let go, I tell you!" she warned.

But he did not. And she struck. "Let go my horse, you—you outlaw!" Ellen choked. "You murderer!"

That last rush of angry words stung him as sharply as the fangs of the quirt. Benton's face set in clear lines of doggedness and his chin showed forward truculently. But he still clutched her pony's rein and he would hold it if she quirted his arm off! Suddenly Ellen appeared to realize this, and with a little whimpering cry she sank back in her saddle.

Mirt dropped the pony's rein to sit ruefully massaging his arm where the rawhide had cut through the blue denim of his shirt sleeve. His face was gray under its heavy tan. His tone proved the turbulent mystery in him, but it was quiet with control.

"What's this all about, anyhow? You sure don't act glad to see me!"

SHE was very pale except for a glowing rose spot in each cheek. Their eyes clashed and held. At last

with what seemed a great effort, Ellen Costain stared down at the road. "No —I'm certainly not glad to see you back! Oh, Mirt," she burst out pleadingly, "why did you have to stop me? I—I didn't think you'd have the nerve. Oh," she cried furiously, "I despise you, Mirt Benton! I hate you!"

He jerked back as if struck. His big chest raised slowly and he had to swallow several times before he could speak. "For gosh sakes, Ellen! What in the world are you talkin' about? What have I done? You mean you and Latigo—"

"Oh, Latigo! Mirt, I never thought you would lie to me. Saying you had to go to your uncle because he got hurt in a fall and couldn't work his stock. And then killing—"

"Killing who? Say," he told her heatedly, "I've never lied to you and never will. I have been in Arizona the last ten months whether you believe it or not, and I reckon Uncle Jeff would be glad to tell you so. Now, what's this talk about killing?"

"Killing Ribbons McGuire when you held up the stage two months ago. And taking eleven thousand—"

His ejaculation made her stop. Benton leaned sharply to peer at the girl. Thirty seconds passed without the merest twitch of a muscle, the least flicker of his eyelids. Then he gulped and sat straighter on his horse, his face gone sallow.

"McGuire," Mirt said softly. He shook his head. "Gosh, Ellen, why would I kill Ribbons McGuire? He never hurt anybody! You claimin' I held up the stage, stole eleven thousand dollars, and murdered poor old Ribbons? And—uh, what else have I done?"

The sincerity of his manner made her hesitate puzzledly. But then with a toss of her head the girl wrenched her gaze away. She lifted the reins as if to start her pony forward, but lowered them at Mirt's swiftly upraised hand. Ellen gave a contemptuous sigh.

"As if you didn't know! Oh, Mirt, Mirt! Well—here, then!" Thrusting a hand to the pocket of her pongee blouse, she produced a folded paper which she gave to him. Benton accepted it scowling, and slowly opened it.

"Don't rush off, Ellen. Wait a minute."

At recognition of the picture on the flimsy gray sheet, an exclamation broke from his lips. Benton felt a weight sagging his shoulders, a weight that drooped them lower as he scanned the notice under that crudely printed photograph. His pulse pounded slow, then gathered speed until it was racing, until the blood rushed in a torrent through his temples.

For it was his picture on this wanted handbill issued by Sheriff Cal Maxwell of Longhorn. His description printed there and his name:

Mirt Benton, twenty-four years old, six feet one inch tall, weight a hundred and ninety pounds. Usually wears corduroys, or leather chaps, blue shirt, gray sombrero. Wanted for the murder of Ribbons McGuire and theft of eleven thousand dollars from the Addison-Longhorn stage coach; wanted for the shooting of Carl Mills at Four Corners in holdup; wanted for the theft of fourteen Kentucky blooded horses. Five hundred dollars reward, dead or alive!

His heavy eyes raised to the girl. Mirt wondered if this was all a weird nightmare? It was almost unbelievable. For a moment he was too utterly stunned to talk. The Adam's apple jogged in his throat as, gray of face, he crumpled the handbill in a white-knuckled fist?"

"And you're believin' it?"

Ellen looked away while her hands twisted the reins nervously. "At first I didn't, no matter what they said. But—there's proof. You were described by several witnesses. Your sandy hair and your horse, Stud, and—"

"Stud! You mean he was on these jobs? Why, Ellen, I just stopped off to get Stud at Hank Barron's and

Hank told me somebody stole him about five months back!"

He stopped. Now that he thought of it, Barron had seemed strangely cold when Mirt drew up to the old spread this morning. At first Hank had made a motion as if to yank out his gun. But then he had seemed to think better of it, and responded to questions with a curt yes or no. Odd, Mirt had thought at the moment. However, he had dismissed the strangeness of Hank's greeting, telling himself maybe Barron wasn't feeling well.

He heeled the sorrel alongside the girl's horse and reached for her hand. She evaded him swiftly to place her palm on her wide rivet-decorated belt.

"Listen, Ellen, this—well, gosh, it stampedes me! I can't explain it. But I'll swear on a stack of Bibles that I never held up a stage in my life—nor anything else, for that matter. I shot a man once, several years ago, but—Ellen," he begged, "you ought to know I'm no outlaw. Honest, this thing is all wrong. It's—" Mirt flung his hands wide, groping helplessly.

"I tried for the longest time to believe that," she whispered. "Dad and I just couldn't think you'd do such things, Mirt. But the descriptions always tallied. And there was your horse, Stud. Oh," she cried suddenly, "if it isn't true, then—"

The rumble of hoofs made both start. Ellen Costain rose in her stirrups for a fleeting glance over his shoulder. With a frightened exclamation she leaned and snatched a headstrap of the sorrel, almost dragging it after her off the road and into the twisted mass of cedars.

They were in the nick of time. Two riders passed at a fast trot, and Benton identified the narrow shoulders, long chin, and somewhat surly countenance of Latigo Scandrett shaded by his low-pulled sombrero. His companion was unknown to Mirt, a stubby-built individual of dark complexion, a man who carried one shoulder higher than the other.

THEY were gone, Ellen and Mirt exchanged looks; then with a half-smile of hope tugging at the corners of his mouth. Mirt led the way back onto the road.

"You wouldn't have done that unless you cared a little bit," he said quietly. "Ellen, do you mean that Latigo hasn't made much—uh, that you two aren't engaged or anything?"

"No." She looked intently at her saddle horn.

Hope rose higher in his breast. "Listen, I give you my word, this outlaw business is some kind of frame-up! Don't say I never can see you or speak to you again, will you? Because if I ever did anything, I'm aimin' to put this straight!"

She cocked her head. "Oh, Mirt! But how can you? Where are you going?" she exclaimed as he kneed his horse.

He went past her, grimly hopeful. "Headin' for town. I figure you're sold on me, Ellen, and now I'm takin' on the next in importance—which is Cal Maxwell. I'm goin' to make talk with the sheriff and see if I can't win him over. So long!"

She cried something after him, but it was drowned in the rapid thrum of the sorrel's hoofs. Mirt Benton stood up in his stirrups to wave over the ballooning cloud of dust. He was not certain she waved back—or did she? The bend in the road shut off the view then and relaxing, he fell in troubled reflection.

Wrath boiled in Mirt, blind wrath, aimed at the scoundrel who had dared impersonate him in holdups and killings and stock thefts. His lips became a straight white slash over his set chin; his gray eyes took on an icy glint like the sparkle of frost on a November morning. The gall of that skunk, whoever he was, who had been Mirt Benton around here these last five months!

Yes, the only way to get to the bottom of this mystery was to talk with Sheriff Cal Maxwell, whose name was signed to that handbill.

The sorrel started down the mile-long open stretch to the range settlement of Longhorn. Mirt cocked his head as a new consideration popped into his mind. Everyone was thoroughly convinced of his guilt and Maxwell had put a price on his head. Thus, to ride boldly down the town's main street was to invite sudden death. Folks would think he had come to stage another crime to add to that list on the handbill.

He slowed the sorrel, veering to a deep arroyo. Mirt forced his horse down the crumbling bank and noted with satisfaction how it rose on either side higher than his shoulders. He proceeded along it to the shallow end not far from the alley behind Longhorn's only thoroughfare. There, Benton hesitated, but as he saw no one, he sent the horse scudding for that lane strewn with tin cans and débris. A moment later he swung down and led the sorrel into a lean-to stable owned by Pete Olson, who ran the Acme General Store.

Mirt paused in the doorway rubbing his cheek. Of a sudden he shrank back in shadow as two horsemen came down the alley. He did not see them, did not want to. But when the hoofbeats of their mounts had faded, he ventured a look and found the coast clear.

Hitching his cartridge belt, Benton trotted past the hardware store, across the vacant lot and to the rear of the three-cell frame jail fronted by Maxwell's office. Cautiously Mirt walked its length almost to the sidewalk. He peered up and down, but saw no one coming. It was high noon, and the town dozed lazily.

On tiptoe he moved to the office door. Suddenly opening it, he stepped in. The door crunched shut behind him. Leather whined and the blue Colt leaped into his fist.

"Don't move, Cal! No tricks!"

The reddish-faced, gray-haired man with his feet on the desk had started to turn at sound of someone entering. Benton's command brought Maxwell to his feet with agility amazing for his fifty-odd years. Cal shoved a hand for his holstered gun that lay on his desk with the coiled cartridge belt, but he hesitated as he saw his visitor's trigger finger clench.

"Stand away!"

Maxwell's upper lip curled. He stepped to the center of the room. "Damn you, Benton!"

"I'll just drop your iron in the wastebasket, Cal. Here." He kicked the old-fashioned swivel chair away from the desk. "Sit down. Reckon you're safe there. Sit down!" he barked louder.

The lawman obeyed. His face was twitching, but he said nothing—only watched his captor like a hawk. Mirt swung a leg across the corner of the desk. He kept the Colt alert in his hand.

"Cal, I just got back from Arizona not four hours ago. Understand I'm supposed to have pulled a lot of jobs around here in the last ten months, even to killing Ribbons McGuire." His eyes became steely. "I never stole a cent in my life, never killed anybody. Cal, that handbill of yours is a lie!"

The sheriff's face became choleric. "Put that gun down, you skunk! I'll get you, Benton, and—"

"Shut up!" Mirt leaned. "I tell you again it isn't true! Somebody must be impersonatin' me. That's the only guess I can make. That's the truth, and you can take it or leave it. Cal, give me a chance, won't you?" he insisted. "Don't jump at conclusions, man!"

"Conclusions? Why, you—Confound it, Benton, I never figured you was that kind!" Maxwell cried angrily. "But you sayin' it's all a bad mistake is just hogwash. Late to come whinin' around that way, hain't it? Lass Kirby saw you, saw yore hoss, and even your doggone yellow hair, at that stage job! And Stud left the mark of his left fore hoof that's busted at the edge. It was plain as day in that mud out to the water hole

where them thor'breds were grabbed!"

A shot crackled from the street. There was a crash of broken glass, then a howl of pain. Another shot—and a third, followed by a muffled hoarse command.

Startled, Benton leaped to his feet. He backed hastily for the door and wrenched the knob with his free hand.

"It's Olson—he's dead!" someone shouted.

"They're still inside! Look out, they're comin'! It's Mirt Benton again, boys, and he's hell-bent to kill!"

Mirt's heart seemed to flop over in his breast. For a split second he poised indecisively as if frozen. Then he stepped to the wastebasket beside the desk, plunged his left hand into it, and straightened with the six-gun extended butt-first.

"Cal, you heard that! Could I be two places at the same time? Let's go get those hombres! Quick!"

MAXWELL was a man of lightning decision. He whisked the gun from Mirt and reached to haul the door wider while he snapped out agreement. "I savvy now! Come on!" The lawman plunged over the threshold with Benton close at his heels. They paused on the board porch to ascertain the exact location of the trouble. By mutual consent they started on a run across the vacant lot separating the jail from the hardware shop. Beyond that stood the Acme General Store.

Bangs, the gawky dealer in nails and plows, loomed in his big front window clutching a double barreled shotgun. He jerked it level to blaze away, but in the nick of time caught the sun's reflection on Maxwell's official badge. The pair reached the east corner of Bang's place and rushed across a twelve-foot driveway that ran back to the alley. Through the smashed front window and the open double doors of the general store came wails from Pete Olson's wife, Hilda.

"Cal, look out! There they—"

Benton's cry was drowned in the roar of a forty-five. He shot at the first of two bandanna-masked men tumbling out the side door of the store. In the left hand of the second bandit hung a bulging sack. The first was tall and dressed in corduroy. His sombrero was like Mirt's even to the rattlesnake skin band. The fellow appeared to be Mirt from crown to toe!

A groan and a hard thud close by made Mirt pause, twisting his head to look. Maxwell had pitched on his face in the rutty driveway, his arms flung out. He lay motionless. In his iron-gray hair there was a blotch of scarlet bigger than a man's hand. The bullet had crushed Cal's skull.

It waved over Benton that the sheriff, whom he had just convinced, could not help him now. And it doubled the rage that flamed in him, cast off that undercurrent of anxiety a man has under fire, made him almost berserk. They were shooting as they retreated, that pair, but they were nervous. A bullet wrenched Mirt almost off balance as it tore through his trouser leg. Another buzzed close at his ear. He started after the killers, drew a careful bead, and shot.

The shorter of the men uttered a howl that choked off. Mirt saw he was staggering. Just as Benton fired again they vanished around the rear corner of the hardware store.

He drove his legs faster. Behind the shrieks of Hilda Olson over the body of her big-stomached, affable Swede husband, rent the air. Someone had rushed to Sheriff Maxwell for a quick look. The fellow was yelling, "He's dead!" Heavy boots crackled along the plank walks and there were muddled shouts that told of men coming on the run to shoot at the thieves. But so far, Mirt was alone in close pursuit.

Even as he grasped that, a head poked around the corner of the clapboard store. A gun smoked. Instinct

made Benton duck, but it did him no good. He stopped as if he had struck an invisible stone wall. Pain slit through his side as from a knife driven there. He staggered heavily to his knees.

"There's Benton! Give up, you skunk! I'll kill you!"

The hoarse command came from behind. Turning, Mirt spied Deputy Jack Morgan with a carbine. He was just cocking it.

"That's Benton—he's down!" a cowboy roared behind Morgan.

They both shot. But they were tasty and one slug went wide, the other kicking up sand a few inches away. With a tremendous effort Mirt heaved to his feet. His face was penciled with pain. But the indomitable will of the man drove him relentlessly on. He comprehended that he was wanting to nab the rascals in front, Morgan and town folk closed in behind to kill him. Because he was, to them, the one and only Mirt Benton.

He had been recognized easily. Now that the impostor was gone from view, Jack Morgan assumed that Mirt's bandanna had slipped down from his face—and he *did* have a bandanna knotted at his throat!

Mirt was trying to help the law. The law was trying to kill him. Meanwhile, badly wounded, Benton staggered around the right angle of the hardware building to risk instant death for his trapped recklessness.

A form moved on the ground. It was the fellow Mirt had hit. Savagely the man raised his gun, but Benton's boot shot out. The weapon roared just as it tore from thick fingers. Ahead, Mirt saw the fellow's partner, the masquerader, backing anxiously in an effort to stand Mirt off while he seized one of two horses, a black and a brown, that danced nervously just out of his reach.

That hombre was shooting close now! A slug bit leather from the sole of Mirt's boot and hastily he threw himself behind a portly rain barrel. A bullet thudded into it, then another. With its only rusty wire snapped, the barrel collapsed and drained water in a sudden cascade after the hunted, yet hunting, Benton.

THIS time it was twice as difficult to regain his feet. Mirt's side felt sucked into the maw of some invisible tube. He was dazed, dizzy. Something bit his ear and his raised hand showed blood. The lobe had been struck off by Jack Morgan, using his carbine more accurately with every shot.

Mirt's hesitation provided the chance his impostor down the alley wanted. The fellow whirled, lunging at the big black horse. But it shied obstinately and he missed. In desperation the man grabbed the brown horse instead and flung himself over the saddle. As Mirt fired his last cartridge the outlaw wheeled, darted between two sheds fronting on the alley, and went thundering away toward the south.

The big black started to follow. Mirt's lips were hot and parched, but somehow he managed a thin, shrill whistle. Instantly the stallion halted, cocking its head. Its ears flipped toward Benton like tiny funnels. It was his own horse Stud, stolen from Hank Barron's ranch five months ago.

They were shooting at him almost in volleys now, but Mirt was oblivious. He got out of view behind one of the sheds, tangled his fist in the forelock of the horse, and vaulted. The first time he failed to attain the saddle. But the second time, though his very head threatened to burst from pain, he was on.

Stud streaked for the prairie with a jerk that took Benton's breath away. Somehow he clung, leaning into the mane that pelted his face like a rain of sharp needles. They shot west, parallel with the alley, trailing a balloon of dust that was like a dirty, derisive banner. Bullets or not—Mirt Benton, impostor, and Mirt Benton the genuine—both had got away!

Mounted pursuit would start in a matter of seconds. Word passed

around that "Mirt killed Ilson, didja hear?" "Benton stuck up the Acme!" "That range rat killed Pete right in his store!" All Longhorn would be boiling for revenge. And the trouble was, Mirt himself had been present this time. He had been seen and recognized by Deputy Jack Morgan and doubtless some others.

He groaned. His side quivered so that he was not certain whether or not he could stay in the saddle. Dizziness attacked him in waves, making him reel. Desperately he clenched one hand in the mane of Stud, the other over the horn of his saddle, and clung. He rode with eyes tightly closed until nausea receded, then with gritted teeth and eyes wide, sought to formulate a course.

The cedar swamp would be safest. There was no other shelter within several miles and the swamp was large; it was a maze of bogs, fallen trees, shadowy clumps of shrub. A man should be able to hide there and to find rest while searchers prowled as thoroughly as they wanted. The question was, could he make it! Stud was plenty fast, although Benton saw several riders forge out from town even now. Stud would get him to the slough, all right, if Mirt could hang on.

His pain-wracked eyes chanced on a thing slung over the horn. It was black and appeared to be of canvas. With every long stride of the hurrying stallion the bag slapped explosively. Mirt saw that it was fastened by its drawstring looped over the horn.

He managed to work it off. The sack was rather heavy and of considerable bulk. The fugitive's heavy eyes flashed. He knew without reading the name stenciled in white that it said Longhorn Bank. The bank gave that sack to Pete Olson to contain daily receipts of the store. Mirt had the robbers' loot!

The stallion thundered nearer the old covered bridge over the Huckamoga River. It was shorter that way to the swamp. Mirt ventured another apprehensive look back and saw the black dots of several riders coming after him at full tilt.

But he felt a little stronger, and with that strength, new determination to get away. He gave Stud a life of the rein that the stallion answered nobly. They shot under the bridge and along the hard, dry sand of its bottom toward that arroyo he had followed into town. When they turned into it Mirt permitted the horse to slow to a rapid trot. The strain of full speed was rousing his wounded side again.

FINALLY they reached the swamp and without hesitation plunged in. Benton calculated that he would hear searchers prowling before they could sight him, and he felt he had at least a fair chance of going free.

He halted Stud, but sat debating whether to climb down from the saddle. That dizziness seemed to be returning. He maneuvered the grimy canvas bag open for a look inside. Mirt's eyes flared at what he saw.

"Yellowbacks! Yes sir, every one! Not two-bits in silver or a dollar bill in the sack!"

He pursed his lips for a low whistle. It must be that Pete and Hilda Olson had hoarded their profits, since this sackful was vastly more than the Acme took over the counter in weeks. Now that he mulled it over, Benton recalled that the Olsons and Terence Stenfield of the bank had had an altercation of some kind more than a year ago. There must be six or eight thousand dollars in this sack, all in twenties, fifties, hundreds. Undoubtedly it represented the whole wealth of the Olsons, man and wife.

His mind went back to Sheriff Maxwell and to the cherubic-faced storekeeper. Both of them dead now. Resentment started again in Mirt that two such men should be wantonly shot down. And he could understand the rage folks felt for this gun-fast desperado committing outrage after outrage, killing after killing. No won-

der Ellen Costain had put Mirt out of her mind and heart!

A thought struck him. "Gosh! Now it's the real me they're wantin'!"

The more he pondered that, the graver his face became. Whether the genuine Mirt Benton was captured, or the impersonator—it would be all one to Longhorn folk. They did not know what he knew. They would not believe there were two.

His shirt was bloody and sticking to his side. The wound had an ugly look. Mirt stared at the tips of his fingers, then cautiously touched the live spot again. As near as he could tell, it was a two-inch cut the bullet had made, and the slug must still be in his flesh. His every breath came only with sharp pain. And despite his buoyant strength Mirt was fast growing weak. It would be days before he could secure medical attention without almost certain capture. He hadn't a rag or a cloth clean enough or large enough to use for a bandage.

Shuddering with the torment that started again in the wound, he kneed Stud to go on through the shadowy swamp. But of a sudden Mirt again drew rein. He sat like a statue, listening. His eyes fastened on Stud's ears saw them quiver, saw one turn before he was positive of the sound himself.

But nothing happened and the horse seemed reassured. Benton's pulse pounded as he moved on, always wary lest he blunder into the various posses which now must be ransacking the swamp.

A gasp spilled from his lips. So abruptly that it knifed a chill through him, men loomed among the trees. They came in single file, four of them. All were hard of face; all carried guns ready for instant use. Jack Morgan was their leader, the dead sheriff's deputy.

"He's got to be in here, and if he is we'll find him!" Morgan grated.

"Yeah, and when we do," Clinch Dill, a rider for a cattleman named Green, snarled, "we want you to go visit relatives, Jack. Because, whether yuh like it or not, Benton is goin' to stretch rope!"

"You can't stop 'em and you oughtn't to try because—" floated from the last of the probing quartet.

Mirt sat motionless. He sidled Stud over to a gnarled and twisted tree that rose out of spongy ground, and sought to lean. He was sick, really sick. His head swam with dizziness overclouded by a gray haze.

Again Mirt heard voices. He could scarcely tell where they came from, but they were fairly loud. Desperately he sought to gather new stamina to ride on, but he was without strength or will.

"Mirt!" someone whispered behind him. "Quick, here they come! Can't you turn Stud?"

There was a gasp. "Why, you have the loot, Mirt!" Ellen Costain accused bitterly. "Then you are guilty! This proves it!"

He seemed to pitch headlong into a great pool of black. Slumped over the neck of his horse, Benton had become unconscious.

HE opened his eyes to semi-darkness and a sense of being walled in, as if he were in a room. For a moment Benton lay quietly in the wide, comfortable bed, looking about. He distinguished dark green shades drawn to the bottom on the two windows, and knew from the light that filtered through their cracks that it was day.

Mirt slid a hand over the covers to find his side heavily swathed in a bandage. It did not pain him now, feeling only a little sort. Except for insistent hunger, he felt fresh and rested. As he fell to wondering where he was, a key grated in the door lock. Mirt raised on one elbow as someone entered the room, and in the light over the threshold saw it was Mike Costain's pretty daughter.

"Ellen!"

She closed the door quickly and

came to stand beside his bed. "How do you feel? You had a long sleep!"

"Feel pretty good. How long have I been here? Is this your house?"

There was a wan smile tugging at her lips as she nodded. "Yes—and my bedroom. Deputy Morgan came here almost the first thing and demanded to search. But he refused to search my room, as I rather expected when I put you here. I hid your horse. After Morgan left, I put Stud in the corral. Does your side hurt?"

He shook his head. "You mean they're still huntin' me?"

"People are pretty much aroused, Mirt. I—well, Wing Kennedy told me just this morning they've raised the reward to a thousand dollars."

Mirt sank back, awed. He raised himself again, his arms stiff for support. "And you've kept my bein' here a secret even from Kennedy, workin' on the Flying C? From Latigo Scandrett, too? What about your father?"

"Dad isn't home. He and two of the boys drove some stock to Addison on Monday. The boys are back, but Dad had to wait to get cash. We are hard up and there's a thousand dollar note to pay off at the bank tomorrow. With some other debts, we need quite a lot of money. I hope Dad got it!" she exclaimed worriedly. "He'll be back today on the stage and—" Ellen broke off, biting her lip.

Benton understood that she had not meant to let him know about her father, about Mike bringing home a considerable sum in cash. Which signified that Ellen again believed him guilty of the recent crimes in the county. He scowled, raking long fingers through his sandy fair.

"Who bandaged me up like this?"

"Dr. Allison. He was awfully disturbed, because he said the law requires him to report—" Again she stopped abruptly, and turned away. "I had to promise you would leave as soon as you can, Mirt."

"All right. But this all seems pretty tough. I've really been in Arizona the whole ten months. Saved a little money, and all the way home I kept plannin' how you and I—"

"Please, Mirt!"

He watched her turn toward the drawn shade of the south window. A lump came into his throat as he saw again, for the thousandth time, how lovely Ellen Costain was with her clear profile, the high, intelligent forehead and withal, the beauty of her character that her face portrayed.

"I won't bother you long," he said at last. "But somebody may collect that thousand on me, unless I have a lot more luck than I've had lately. If Mike is hard up, and you believe I killed those people—why not you?"

Ellen spun around, then checked the speech that came to her lips. Mirt saw her cover her face with slender brown hands as she sought to master her emotion. And it did something deep inside him as he saw that she still did care. Else why had she hidden him from the law? Or was that merely out of their long friendship, for old times' sake?

She moved to the door. "Dad won't come to my room, and maybe he'll be going to town tonight anyhow. I think he will, to pay that note."

"Don't worry. I'll be gone when you come back, Ellen."

She looked up swiftly. "Oh, no. You can't go now—you shan't! Not until we come back, at least! You see—it's safer," the girl explained lamely. "Mirt, you've got to promise you'll stay right here until I—we—come home. Won't you do that for me?" Ellen pleaded.

Mystified by her sudden agitation though he felt certain she wanted him out of her life, Benton nodded. Ellen watched him for a moment as if to convince herself. Then picking up the tray of dishes, she left the room. He heard the key grate in the lock and knew he was again a prisoner.

AT once Mirt swung his legs over the side of the bed. He was unsteady on his feet, but he thought that would pass. Deep in thought, he

drew on his clothes, which he found hanging in a closet. Of a sudden the fugitive drove his fist into his other palm, eyes kindling.

"That's it! She said Mike would have a lot of cash on him. Then she looked like she wished to gosh she hadn't let it out." He rubbed his chin vigorously. "Ellen thinks I'd go over to the stage and rob Mike!"

His scowl deepened. That was it, certainly. Ellen Costain had said she believed Mirt guilty of all these killings and thefts. No doubt folks said Mirt went to the sheriff's office to keep Cal Maxwell out of the way, while those two rascals looted the general store. And here was Ellen trying to keep him under lock and key until her father and his money were safely home. While at the same time, the girl cared at least enough for Mirt to keep secret his presence at the Flying C.

Suddenly Benton inclined his head. Promise or not, the best thing was to leave now, before the Costains got home. Mirt felt anxious to get out of reach of Longhorn posses. Longhorn vengeance had set a price of a thousand dollars for his life. And he wanted to get out of Ellen's life, since she had practically commanded it.

His going meant a clear field for Latigo Scandrett. Mirt heaved a sigh. Perhaps Ellen would be happier with Latigo, at that.

Going to the west window, he pulled the shade aside. No one was in view in the ranch yard. The sun was edging toward the far horizon and he calculated it must be about four o'clock. Mirt stepped to the south window for another cautious look. He gave a final glance around the room, then raised shade and sash, and crawled out, dropping lightly to the ground.

He still was a little unsteady on his feet, but felt strength rapidly flowing back. Mirt straightened as he heard the crunch of heels and the clink of spur chains. A man came around the corner of the red clapboard ranch house.

Their eyes clashed. It was Wing Kennedy, one of the Costain riders. Wing's jaw dropped in stunned amazement. Mirt lunged at the man, his superior weight and the unexpectedness of the attack giving him an advantage.

Kennedy grabbed for his gun, but too late. He went back to the ground with a thump, Benton astride his waist. And Mirt's fist, starting low, landed a grazing blow to the other's jaw that dazed the cowboy. Mirt wrenched the Colt free and backed away. He rose with the gun leveled.

"Drop it, Benton! Drop it or I'll sure kill you!"

He froze. New trouble. He knew without looking that it was Latigo Scandrett, and that the hard object shoved against the small of his back was a gun. And as he let Kennedy's gun fall, Mirt realized that his rival for Ellen had firm excuse if he desired to carry out his threat of a killing.

Scandrett stepped around front. Cursing, Kennedy got to his feet and stood caressing his jaw. Anger blazed in his blue eyes.

"Seems like we grabbed ourselves a thousand dollars, Wing," the foreman exulted.

"Sure don't mind collectin' it, either. Benton, yo're the lowest critter a-crawlin' this range. Yo're two step-ladders lower'n a gila. Yo're the cussedest—"

"Shut up. Wing. Let's get him into the bunkhouse. Can't take chances with a hair-trigger desperado like him," Scandrett rasped, never shifting his vigilant eyes from the prisoner. "Imagine, this rat trickin' a girl like Ellen, tryin' to make love to her like he's done the last two years! Say, where is she?"

"Gone to meet her paw," Kennedy explained. "Seemed plumb nervous over somethin'. I guess it was that Benton would gun Mike down and grab his cash—of which they sure

can't afford to lose a measly dollar. Course that pal of Mirt's in the general store job died, but there's a third feller out. Ellen wouldn't have me go with her, though. Said I was to watch things here—and I savvy now what she meant, even if she didn't know she meant it," he drawled truculently. "She figured Benton'd come here to hide."

Mirt watched Latigo closely, wondering if he could get the foreman's gun and switch the tables for a getaway. "Huh! Don't like her goin' alone, Wing. You should've gone with her."

"Aw, you know how Ellen is—strong-minded."

"Listen—we'll take Benton to the bunkhouse. You set and guard him. I saw Deputy Morgan down in the willows awhile ago, and I'll rush down there an' bring him. No—uh, I'll send Jack here for this killer," he decided. "Then I'll take a ride over to the stage to make sure Mike and Ellen ain't bothered by Mirt's pal."

That appealed to Kennedy, and at once they started Benton for the low, long quarters of the Flying C hands. "You go on, Latigo. I can handle this hombre all right. He'll get a bullet in him if he wiggles an eyebrow, and I'll snake my lass around him and give a couple hitches on the stove. And then I'll set and watch him till Deputy Morton gits here. Go ahead—don't wait. Stage is darn near due!"

BUT Scandrett insisted on seeing them inside the bunkhouse. He left then, and a moment later as Wing shook out a lass rope on the floor, they heard hoofs fading across the range. Scandrett had gone.

Mirt was on edge, sharply watching every movement of his captor. He realized that now was his last hope of escape. Once in the hands of the posse, bound by their manacles, he faced certain lynching. And of a sudden, while Kennedy had his head turned half away, he charged.

Wham! The bullet nipped Benton's shoulder. But he was under the gun before it crashed again. They went to the floor with a thud that rocked the bunkhouse. But the struggle was as short as it was desperate. The gun wrenched out of Wing's fist, rose, and slashed down. There was a low crunch and the Flying C rider went stiff.

Mirt got to his feet. A sense of terrible guilt for that act flooded him like a cold wave. Gulping, he wrenched his eyes from the blank countenance of Wing Kennedy. He turned and rushed out the door to the corral. Two minutes later he had saddled a long-legged buckskin and was racing away from the Flying C ranch.

But he might run into Scandrett again if he went to the willows, or possibly Jack Morgan and his posse. Mirt changed direction to bear straight south. The buckskin responded to the kick of his heels with its stride lengthened. Bunch grass swept under them; the drum of the horse's hoofs hastened.

Mirt would like to have ridden his own horse, Stud. But the stallion was too well known, too easily recognized. He was leaving Longhorn for good and all; he never expected to see it again, nor Ellen Costain whom he had entertained foolish hopes of marrying. The black horse, much as he prized it, could only betray him wherever he went. Those wanted notices would flood the country.

They swept over gently billowing range toward the highway that curled south to the state line of Arizona. Benton had followed it coming home from his uncle's and he would follow it, but at a distance, going back.

He thought of Mike Costain returning from his several day excursion to raise money. They were all apprehensive of a holdup—Ellen, Latigo, and Kennedy. The awe folk had for Mirt Benton, killer and desperado, certainly made them reluctant to overlook any chance to protect valuables.

"And that lobo impersonatin' me is still roamin' around!"

The notion was startling. With his eyes closed to mere slits Mirt stared ahead, thinking swiftly. Decision forged into his mind, and with slight pressure on the left rein he veered the horse again. It would do no harm, certainly. He didn't want the Costains, father and daughter, held up. Much as his heart ached now for Ellen, the fugitive did not want her last memory of him to be of a robbery. Besides, he knew well enough about Costain's financial difficulties and that Mike could not afford to lose a penny of that cash he was bringing home.

With his leather-colored face set in grim lines, Mirt rode for the approximate spot where Ellen would meet her father. Mike would have his saddle horse tied to a rear spring of the vehicle, as he often did returning from Addison, the shipping point. He usually left the stage at a certain curve of the highway and cut across country to the Flying C.

There was less than a mile still to go, when abruptly Mirt jerked the reins to bring the buckskin up short with legs stiff as poles. He leaned and cupped his hand over the beast's muzzle, listening, searching with his eyes as if to probe the red rock formation ahead that shielded the highway.

A curse dropped from his lips. He caught muffled, angry shouts. And was that a shot?

He jabbed heels at the ribs of the horse to send it flying onward. Mirt took out the Colt he had wrested from Wing Kennedy and saw that it held four cartridges. He stopped his horse again presently, listened, and sprang from leather. There were sounds of a struggle of some kind.

A cry of pain shrilled to him. Mirt's heart almost turned over in his breast. That was Ellen!

Recklessly he plunged through the maze of ragged boulders strewn here centuries ago in some queer volcanic action. Once Mirt slipped and almost fell, but with angry self-accusation he kept his balance and plunged on. The hundred yards to the road seemed miles!

Suddenly he burst from cover. Mirt's eyes widened and a gasp jerked out. Behind the halted stage coach with its panting four horse team, two men were locked in a deadly battle. Near them a girl in a brown corded skirt, gray blouse, and riding boots, with her hair tumbled to the nape of her neck, was just rising out of the thick road dust. She spied Mirt instantly, recoiled—then rushed for a gun that lay in the road.

BENTON ran toward the stage. The driver was nowhere in view. Mirt covered two-thirds of the distance; the fierce battle behind the vehicle still went on. Then Ellen straightened, holding a carbine and yanked it to firing position.

"Stop!" she cried, her face paper-white. "Halt! I—I'll shoot!"

But the fury in him would permit no halt. Mirt had glimpsed the tall black horse ground-reined among boulders on the other side of the road. His eyes followed Mike Costain taking a terrific blow on his long neck. He tottered on his heels and fell. But Mike still had a gun, it developed. The weapon roared uselessly into the sky. His antagonist, clad in corduroys and with a bandanna over his eyes, jumped to plant high-heeled, spurred boots full on Costain's face.

Mike wrenched away. The fellow scooped up something out of the road dust. He held it in one fist—it was s o m e t h i n g green. In his other gleamed a smoking Colt.

Benton saw all this as he raced abreast of the team, then of the coach. He wholly ignored Ellen Costain after one fleeting thought: "She won't shoot! She couldn't shoot me!"

But she did.

The carbine thundered. Mirt twisted, swayed, slammed hard against the door of the old vehicle. There was a

knifelike stab into his side, through the wad of bandage.

Ellen dropped the weapon, her eyes riveted on him. She whimpered, horrified at the thing she had done. Half-fainting, she fell to her knees.

The shot, the pound of Mirt's boots, the girl's cry caught that lone hold-up's attention. He checked his run. Only twelve feet separated them. Mirt closed in. Each whipped up his Colt and the shots were so close, one after the other, that they were telescoped into one sound.

Their bodies smashed together as the masked man's Colt flamed again—but his bullet dug into the road. Benton's gun was gone. But the rage in him provided instant resource. His fist squared like a knuckle-studded maul and it took the man's jaw with a snap of bone that knifed through their ears. The force of the blow lurched the masked head sideways. Mirt struck again, and then went down.

That was all Benton knew for the fury that possessed him until Shaumus Steele, the stage driver, pulled Mirt off while Mike Costain and Ellen stood tensely watching. For a moment Benton could not talk. He was dizzy from the great expenditure of energy and from his new wound as well as the old ones. He started to rise, changed his mind, and sat down heavily in the road.

Ellen threw herself beside him, put her arms around his shoulders. "Mirt! Oh, I shot you! Oh, Mirt!" she wailed hysterically.

"Say, Mike—" Benton drew another breath, nodding to the captured bandit. "Pull that bandanna off him."

Costain stooped. He jerked it away. His face changed, as did the faces of Ellen Costain, and the driver, Steele. For an instant they were dumbfounded.

"Latigo Scandrett!"

"Latigo posin' as me!" Benton stared, awed. He saw now that Scandrett was very near his own build, a thing he had never realized before. That their hair was the same sandy hue. And with Stud, the black horse, and wearing the type of garb Benton habitually wore, the deception had been easy enough.

There was a taut silence. "Mike, have you got your money?"

The rancher nodded as he set about gathering the bills fluttered where Scandrett had dropped them. Mirt ventured then to look at the girl who clutched his shoulders as if she feared he would collapse. Ellen's face went scarlet and she drew a little away. "Mirt, I—"

"Shucks! But what in the world made Latigo do a thing like that? We both—er, wanted to have you, Ellen. Scandrett and I never had a real fallin' out, though we sure didn't hone much for each other. But—" he shook his head—"this ties me!"

"Perhaps it was—jealousy, Mirt."

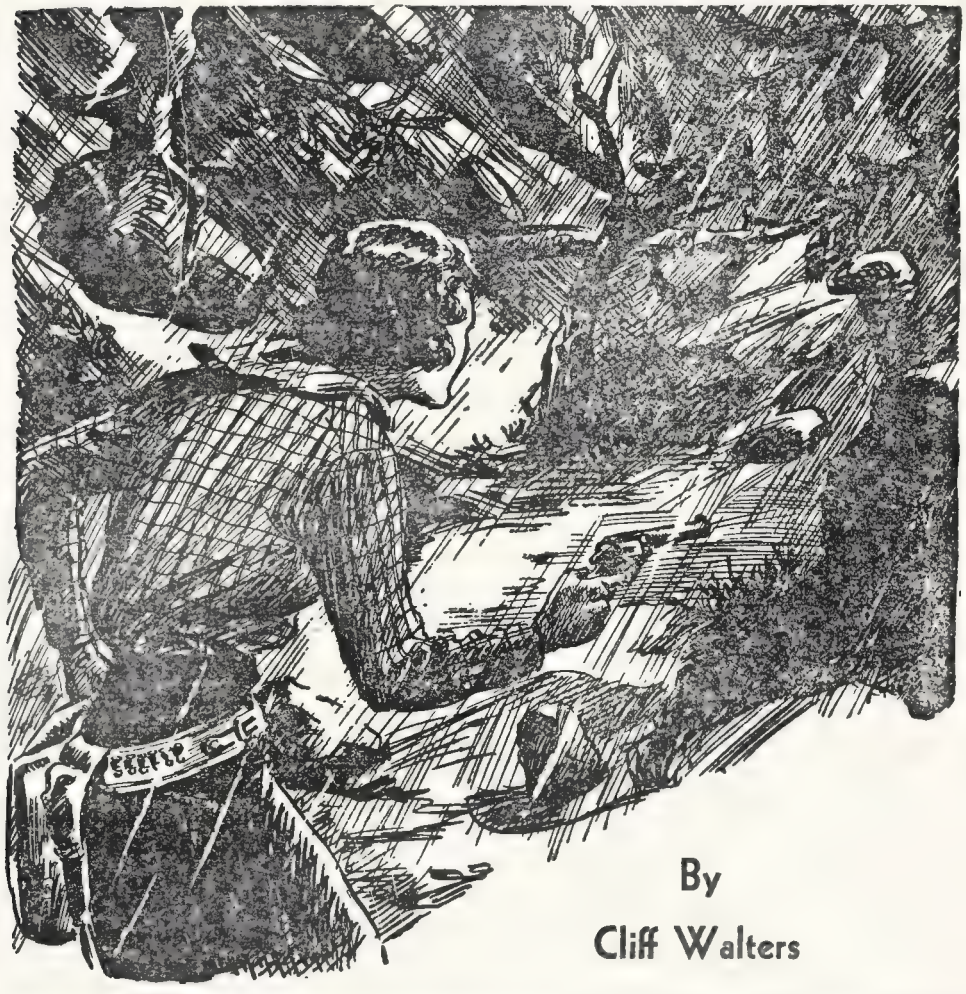
"Jealousy? You mean Latigo was afraid he hadn't any chance?"

She stared down at her twisting fingers. "He hadn't."

"Ellen!" He choked, cleared his throat, and crushed her in his arms regardless of Mike Costain or Scandrett or Steele or the whole population of Longhorn County. "You did think of me then, while I was gone. You—well, tell me, Ellen!"

"Rats!" her father interrupted tolerantly. "Sure thing, Mirt, it never could have been him, even if she had to wait for a certain party till she was fifty. So that fixes that, don't it? Now if you love birds'll haul out o' the way, Steele and I are startin' Mister Scandrett-Benton to the *juzgado* right pronto!"

The Tempest Trail



By

Cliff Walters

Outside the storm was raging. But it was as nothing to the turbulent tempest of despair that bogged down Christine Nelson. For she had a grim choice to make in a dinero dilemma—either take an outlaw's blood-dyed dollars, or accept help from the man she hated.

ALTHOUGH the calendar said that spring was near at hand, winter's blustering guns were scourging the Basin country with a fierce barrage of snow and wind roaring down from the canyon-scarred slope of the Big Horns. The two-roomed log cabin on the bank of Cedar Creek was only a storm-enveloped blur on the landscape. And Christine

Nelson who lived alone in this old cabin with the sagging roof and shiplap floor—well, her thoughts were pretty much of a blur, too.

Her azure eyes, a heritage from Norse ancestors, were dismal with too much futile thinking, too much helpless staring out into the storm and perhaps reading Janet's last letter too many times. She resumed her aimless walking. From the snow pelted window to the kitchen stove; from the stove to the table where lay Janet's letter—and back to the window again.

A weight stronger than wind opened the door gustily. Christine turned. To the gaunt, poorly dressed man who had stepped inside she said:

"Arlie Tullinger—traveling on a day like this! Come over to the fire and warm yourself." Stove lids clattered as the tall girl with the firm mouth, the tawny hair divided evenly in the middle, fed chunks of cedar wood to the flames.

Tullinger shuffled stiffly across the clean floor. He pulled off his canvas gloves, wedged them under his arm and held grimy chapped hands to the heat. His colorless eyes blinked gratefully at Christine, then focused themselves on the coffee pot near the back of the stove. The girl slid the pot forward, strong black coffee left from lunch.

She said: "What's up, Arlie? Out of grub again?"

"Not entirely. Just—just ridin' around."

"People don't just ride around in this kind of weather."

He nodded toward the table. "Must've had another letter from your kid sister. How's she makin' it back at school?"

Inside, Christine winced. Rather defiantly she said: "Just fine—with her studies. She'll be graduating this spring."

"Quite an expense for you," replied Arlie Tullinger, who batched alone in a disreputable shack over at the head of Buffalo Flats.

"It's worth whatever it costs, Arlie."

"Maybe—if you've got the money." His eyes evaded the look these words elicited. "But when your cattle's all gone and your little ranch mortgaged to the hilt—when there's no chance of anything comin' in, but Janet still needin' money to keep her in school—"

"Did you brave this storm just to ride over here and cheer me up?" Christine's azure eyes were stern, her lips a straight line. Then, a little bitterly, she added: "Good heavens, man! I don't have to be reminded of my circumstances. I've been cooped up with them here in this cabin for hours that seem like days. Yes, Janet needs money. And she'll have it. Even if I don't know where it's coming from." Her voice subsided, merged with the hideous noise of wind and snow assailing the cabin.

"There might be ways," said Arlie Tullinger, shifting his weight to the other torn overshoe.

"What's on your mind, Arlie?"

"Well, suppose there's a man not very far from here that's wounded in the side, wounded pretty bad. Suppose he needs grub and blankets—and this." He took from the pocket of his threadbare Mackinaw coat a pint flask of whisky which he set on the table.

CHRISTINE eyed him sharply. "Would that man be your outlaw cousin, Crow Baird? I've heard that he was back in the Basin. I'm right. It is Crow Baird!"

"Yeah, it's him. He had a little ruckus with a sheepherder. Got shot. He come by my shack, but he didn't dare stop. Sheriff Mitchell was on his trail. Now Mitch is on my trail and thinks I don't know it. He's out there by your barn right now. If I take supplies to Crow, the jig's up. They'll ketch him. Hang him, I expect."

"Wouldn't that be what Crow Baird deserves?" Christine countered. "As far back as I can remember your

cousin has stolen cattle, Arlie. And two of the best horses dad ever owned. I don't know anyone I loathe more than I do Crow Baird."

"Warren Tyler, maybe?"

Christine froze. "That's one name we don't mention in this cabin!"

Rebuked, but undeterred, Tullinger went on: "Crow's always got a roll of money on him. If I was to leave here, lead Sheriff Mitchell away, and you was to take some grub and blankets to Crow—"

"Good heavens, Arlie! You *must* think I'm hard up."

He nodded. "But you'll keep that kid sister of yours in college till she finishes, if you can. I've watched you slavin' your life away around this old place, Christine. Sellin' off—mortgagin' till there ain't anything left. I'll bet Janet wouldn't want to finish school if she knew what you're up against—that you've got your back to the wall."

"She won't know it."

"She will if you quit sendin' her money."

Many times in these last few hours Christine had considered this. She said: "Nevertheless, Arlie, I'm not interested in your proposition. Not in the least. Aiding a fugitive constitutes a crime in itself. And certainly I don't owe Crow Baird anything."

"He'd pay you well for what you done. I've told him I'd send somebody. I hate to think of him layin' up there in that old cave, freezin', starvin'—maybe dyin'."

"Then go out there and tell Sheriff Mitchell where he is. That would be the humane thing."

"It might cause more shootin'. Crow won't be taken as long as he's got strength to pull a trigger. 'Specially by Sheriff Mitchell. Them two hates each other like—well—like you hate Warren Tyler."

"Arlie! I told you—"

"Sorry."

"Suppose I were to tell Mitch where Crow is? That he's up at Charcoal Cave?"

"That wouldn't be quite fair to me, would it? I knew you needed money bad. I thought this might be a way to get some. Oh, it ain't a pleasant job, but it's safe enough. The sheriff'll tag along after me when I leave here. Which I'd better be doin' soon."

Methodically Christine poured a cup of coffee for her guest. And glanced at Janet's letter lying there on the table.

"Guess Crow's bay horse could do with a sack of oats, too," Tullinger was saying between gulps. "You could pack your old sorrel pony and ride the roan."

"I could *if* I were going to Charcoal Cave."

OUTSIDE the wind and snow whipped around the rusted pipe protruding through the dirt roof and choked the rising smoke back in fitful gusts. Christine looked at Arlie Tullinger, who was gulping his second cup of coffee; looked at the pint flask of whisky standing there on the table beside the letter of a younger sister who needed money.

Outside a storm raging—within Christine, another storm of clashing emotions. Guilty dollars beckoning. Conscience, and hatred which had crystallized with the years against Crow Baird, objecting, telling her not to do this thing.

Eventually the victory went to little Janet Nelson and her requirements. The same premise upon which Christine had based these last bleak years of her life, a premise that was a heavy but gallantly borne cross.

The older girl, whose face had strength of character where little Janet's had only soft prettiness, was determined that her sister should have those things which she herself had been denied. Janet's world must not be pinched within the horizon of these desolate hills. There must be greater bounty for her. Companionship, perhaps romance.

A forbidden name flashed into Christine's troubled mind—Warren

Tyler. She looked out the window at the swirling snow and saw a lean strong face with adamant gray eyes.

A chair was scraping back from the table. Arlie Tullinger was rising, covering disheveled hair with a greasy cap and saying:

"Shall I leave the whisky?"

"Yes, Arlie." The girl's voice was scarcely above a whisper.

"Thanks a heap."

Torn overshoes shuffled across the shiplap floor again. The door opened, closed quickly. The storm swallowed Arlie Tullinger and the officer who followed him.

Christine set two loaves of bread on the table, a small jar of chokecherry jelly and a few cans of vegetables taken from her scant supply. Then she swathed her slim strong body in heavy clothing, wound a woolen shawl around her head and throat. Next came the two pairs of thick socks which would help consume some of the excess space in her father's old boots. Then his leather coat, sheep-lined, with the little hole under the left collar flap.

ASTRIDE Old Roan and leading the sorrel pack pony, Christine was at last leaving the barn. She rode due east toward the Big Horns. With her head bowed against wind and stinging snow, she looked like a troubled angel of mercy forcing reluctant horses into the teeth of the biting gale. "You're breaking the law!" howled the wind. "Maybe Crow Baird will have money and maybe he won't —Crow Baird—Crow Baird!"

Lips compressed, Christine plodded on, pretending not to hear the shrieking accusations of the wind. She tried to think of Janet. There must be some special clothes for graduation. All the other girls would have them. And a new spring coat. Too, there must be a graduation gift from Big Sis. Something to keep always. Not like the pitifully cheap little present that had gone East at Christmas time. It wasn't the wind that made blue eyes water now. It was a tear that brimmed over and froze on Christine's cheek.

Two miles—three—and every storm-lashed cedar tree a restless ghost of Sheriff Mitchell. The crunch in ever deepening snow of hoofs angling up the big ridge forming the north boundary of Cedar Valley; the furious, breath-taking sweep of wind on the crest of that ridge; the slow diagonal descent on the other side. Then, ever so faintly, the sound of a bell.

Christine halted her horses, listened. Again that bell and the wind-stifled yell of a man. Then, out of the storm, the blurred figure of a man. He was dragging his left leg, leaning on a crudely fashioned cedar crutch and moving toward the waiting girl.

"Oh! And I thought it was Warren Tyler!"

Those words died like a despairing sob on the blue lips of old Scotty Heath, sheepherder. Christine could see hope dying in his eyes. She rode toward the spot where he had slumped wearily down in the snow and called:

"Why haven't you got this band of sheep up there under the protection of the rim?" She pointed in the direction of that now invisible sandstone ledge where the Big Horns, only a quarter mile away, shelved off into the foothills. "If it keeps on storming, won't they pile up down there in that draw?"

"Yes, Miss Nelson." Scotty's voice mingled with the dirge of snow-clotted sheep bells. "But I canna drag myself much further. I'm shot in the leg, ma'am. Crow Baird. He was trying to steal—"

"You should be in your wagon, Scotty!" She swung from her saddle, handed him the pint of whisky she had taken from the pocket of her father's leather coat.

"Thanks," mumbled the herder, tilting the bottle to his mouth. "Hanh! If things was—was different 'twixt you and Warren Tyler, ma'am, I'd be beggin' you to ride to his ranch and

fetch him here. He promised to be here two days ago. If help don't come soon, verra soon, a whole band of sheep will be bogged down and smothered to death in snow!"

"There's no reason why you should perish with them," Christine contended.

"But—only a quarter of a mile from the rimrock!" he groaned, as he returned the bottle to Christine. "If I could only get 'em to trailing. If Crow Baird hadna killed my dog. Or if I only had a bit of feed!"

"I have a sack of oats on my pack horse."

"Oats!" Scotty Heath struggled to a standing position again. "If you'll sell me them oats, ma'am, and maybe help me start these sheep to moving—"

"Not that I owe Warren Tyler anything!"

"I do," said the Scot with humble loyalty. "Warren's always been verra fair with me. I hate to fail his trust. I—I'd rather die, ma'am."

"If I help, it's because I can't stand to see a bunch of dumb animals die. Let me help you on my horse, Scotty. What about the sack of oats? What good will one sack do a whole band of starving sheep?"

Enthusiastically he explained that by baiting the lead ewes with grain, they could get the stolid, snow-harassed animals to trailing. Shelter was the main thing right now. Once the band was under the protection of that rocky rim a quarter mile to the east, they would be saved. But another night on the open range would see them all perished, buried deep in frozen tombs.

WHILE Scotty, mounted on Old Roan, circled the band, Christine baited a bell ewe with a trickle of grain from the gunny sack. Other sheep immediately pressed close to the girl, who, breaking a trail, retreated toward the rimrock. Eventually the whole band was stringing out.

A heartbreaking quarter of a mile for Christine, but it was accomplished. The sheep were on that snowless strip of range which paralleled the high rim, their ceaseless blatting, their muffled bells echoing along rocky acoustics. Ravenously they began attacking brush and clumps of dried yellow grass.

"Fine!" whooped old Scotty, riding up to where Christine waited. "I'll see you get paid for this, ma'am!"

"I don't want anything from Warren Tyler, Scotty. In fact, I'd much prefer that you didn't mention this to him. Helping to save some dumb animals was my privilege. Doing Warren Tyler a good turn was my misfortune!"

"At least I can build a fire, ma'am, and let you warm up."

"I haven't time, thanks."

Christine was mounting Old Roan again when another snow-plastered rider emerged from a fringe of brush near the rimrock. He was a tall man of about thirty; wide-shouldered and with a lean strong face dominated by a pair of keen gray eyes. He was Warren Tyler, sheepman.

Christine's blue eyes turned as cold as the day. She tried not to see Warren Tyler. But he rode directly toward her and his deep penetrating voice said:

"I couldn't help seeing what you did, Christine. Grateful as I am, I'm sorry your mercy had to be lavished on one you think so unworthy of it. I know you need money to keep Janet in school. If I dare to offer you—"

Her shawled head was high. "If there's any reward, let it be in the form of a promise—that you'll never speak to me again." Bitterness tinctured her tone. "Especially when I'm wearing this old coat of dad's. The one with the bullet hole in it—here!" The point of her mitten indicated the tiny hole under the left collar flap.

Steadily Warren Tyler held her in his gray gaze. "The statement I made three years ago in a courtroom still stands, Chris. My father brought the first sheep into this country and we

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had differences with cattleman Carl Nelson. But I didn't kill him.

"You convinced a jury of that," she admitted. "Which, I suppose, is all that really matters!"

"I wish it were that simple. It isn't. All that's ever really mattered to me is what you believe, Chris. In spite of what has happened, I can't forget those happier days when you and I used to meet over at Willow Springs."

"Get out of my way!"

Suddenly alarmed at her reaction to the sincerity of Warren Tyler's gray eyes, the persuasion of his voice, Christine clumped heavy boots against Old Roan and trailed off into the storm. But if she started on a course which would take her back home, she kept to this direction only until she was lost to the sight of Warren Tyler and his injured herder. Then she veered in a wide semicircle back toward the rim again.

WITH a sack of supplies slung across her shoulder, Christine was soon climbing a broken terrace of ledge rock. She entered the dark mouth of a cave which yawned from under a bulging rim. Near the entrance of that cavernous place drooped a gaunt bay horse. A short distance beyond was a dying fire.

"Mr. Baird!"

Her tremulous words echoed back to Christine. Hesitantly she moved forward, saw a man lying there on the rock floor. The hard-looking face of Crow Baird gazed vacuously up at his visitor.

"Carl Nelson's girl." The words escaped through lips that scarcely moved. "Did Arlie Tull—"

"He sent me, yes. He sent this, too." She placed the whisky flask to his mouth, heard the amber liquid gurgling down his parched throat.

"That's—better," he groaned. "A little toast—to death."

"Death?"

"Yeah. Lived like a wolf. Dyin' like one—in a rocky den. Funny— Carl

(Continued on page 111)

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You walk into an office and put down before your prospect a letter from a sales organization showing that they did work in their own office for $11 which formerly could have cost them over $200. A building supply corporation pays our man $70, whereas the bill could have been for $1,600! An automobile dealer pays our representative $15, whereas the expense could have been over $1,000. A department store has expense of $88.60, possible cost if done outside the business being well over $2,000. And so on. We could not possibly list all cases here. These are just a few of the many actual cases which we place in your hands to work with. Practically every line of business and every section of the country is represented by these field reports which hammer across dazzling, convincing money-saving opportunities which hardly any business man can fail to understand.

Profits Typical of the Young, Growing Industry

Going into this business is not like selling something offered in every grocery, drug or department store. For instance, when you take a $7.50 order, $5.83 can be your share. On $1,300 worth of business, your share can be $1,167.00. The very least you get as your part of every dollar's worth of business you do is 67 cents—on ten dollars' worth $6.70, on a hundred dollars' worth $67.00—in other words two thirds of every order you get is yours. Not only on the first order—but on repeat orders—and you have the opportunity of earning an even larger percentage.

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(Continued from page 108)

Nelson's girl. 'Nother drink." Again the amber fluid gurgled.

"I've brought some grub if—" the girl began.

"Take it back with you. I won't need it. Money's in my saddle pocket over there. Couple hundred. Maybe three. Take it all. And my horse. It's little enough for—Carl Nelson's girl. Huh! That same old coat."

"Coat? What about this coat?"

"That—bullet hole. Always shoot straight—me."

"Baird!" Her voice was a wild cry as she dropped to her knees beside this dying man. "Tell me—"

"Five head of steers. Stole 'em at Willow Springs," he mumbled. "Seen Nelson comin' over ridge. He had six-shooter, but I had—the old rifle—"

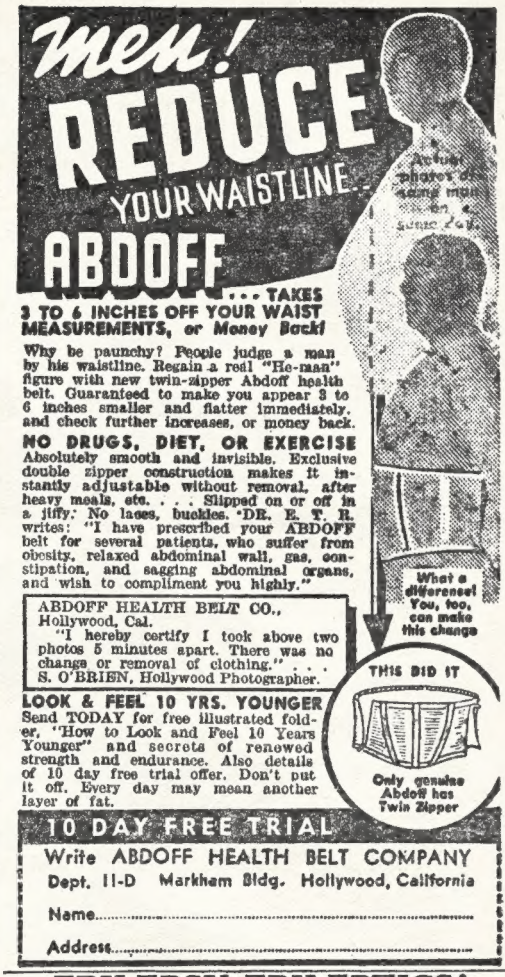
"You killed him?"

"I killed him. Take money—" His words became incoherent babble then. Alcohol fumes were snapping that fragile thread by which a wounded outlaw had clung to life.

A violent sob shook the girl swaying there on feelingless knees. Firelight shadows danced giddily around rock walls. It seemed that an overwhelming darkness was surging into Charcoal Cave, darkness that threatened to envelop Christine. But a steadying hand was on her shoulder. She looked up, saw Warren Tyler.

"It's all right, Chris." His voice, husky, gentle, seemed to be coming from a far distance. "I had to know where you were going today. I followed. And got here in time to hear what Crow Baird said. Now I'm going to get down on my knees beside you and thank God that you heard what Crow had to say."

He was kneeling beside the girl. She looked into his gray eyes, saw an alien mist in them. Outside the storm still raged. Yet Christine, her tawny head pillowed on Warren's shoulder, seemed far away from winter. The wind wasn't howling. It was singing a song of forgiveness, a wild exotic melody of love.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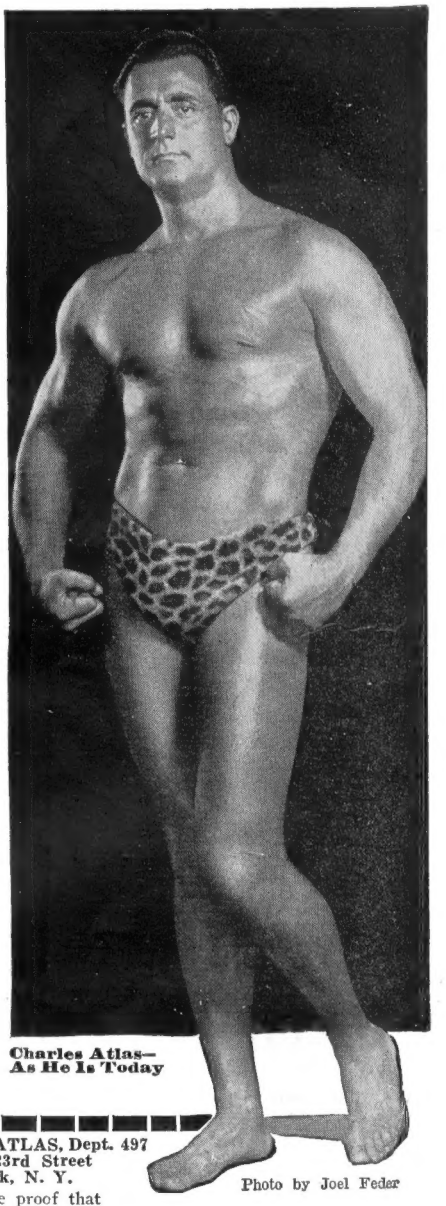

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NA-1 . . . Our most popular value and most beautifully styled! Richly engraved and most beautifully styled! Yellow Rolled Gold Plate set with TWO fiery, genuine diamonds. Fully guaranteed and exquisitely dainty square model case of smart, engraved link bracelet to match. Complete with ultra dependable movement. Should sell at $29.75. Special "Friend-Making" price only $19.75 — $1.00 down — only $1.87 a month (about 6c a day).

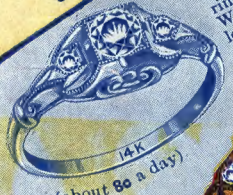
$1.00 down
Then a few cents a day

10 MONTHS TO PAY

17 Jewel BULOVA only $24.75

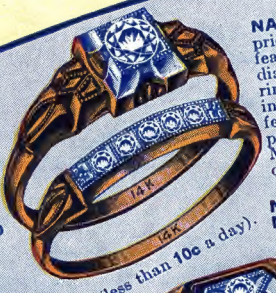
NA-2 . . . Lady's BULOVA in the charm and color of Natural Rolled Gold Plate. 17 Jewel *Bulova* movement. Matching link bracelet. Extraordinary BULOVA value at $24.75 — $1.00 down — only $2.37 a month (about 8c a day).

See for yourself why ROYAL — "America's Largest Mail Order Credit Jewelers" — has won thousands of friends throughout the country.



Only $24.75 **Just $2.37 a month**

NA-3 . . . Magnificent square prong ring of richly engraved 14K Solid White or Yellow Gold; specially selected fiery, genuine center diamond and 2 matched side diamonds. Specify color gold desired. "Friend-Making" price only $24.75 — $1.00 down — $2.37 a month (about 8c a day).



$29.75 for BOTH RINGS
Only $2.87 a month

NA-4 . . . Very lovely and very specially priced. Expertly matched Bridal Ensemble featuring an unusually brilliant, genuine diamond in the square prong engagement ring and FIVE matched genuine diamonds in the wedding ring. BOTH rings are offered in 14K Solid White or Yellow Gold — please specify choice. Special "Friend-Making" price for BOTH rings complete only $29.75 — $1.00 down — $2.87 a month

If purchased separately:
Engagement ring only . . $19.75
Wedding Ring only $15.50

NA-4A . . . Engagement ring only . . $19.75
NA-4B . . . Wedding Ring only $15.50
$1.00 down — balance 10% monthly

(less than 10c a day).

(about 8c a day)

Only $37.50 **Just $3.65 a month**

NA-5 . . . Engagement ring de luxe, artistically set with a specially selected dazzling, genuine center diamond and SIX matched diamonds on the sides. Elegantly designed 14K Solid Yellow Gold setting. Smartly engraved. A very special "Friend-Making" value at only $37.50 — $1.00 down — only $3.65 a mo. (Just about 12c a day).

Only $16.95 **Just $1.59 a month**

NA-6 . . . He-man's modern type initial ring of 10K Solid Yellow Gold. 2 Oval shaped raised white gold initials and a genuine diamond set in the genuine black onyx top. Specify initials desired. Special "Friend-Making" price only $16.95 — $1.00 down — $1.59 a month.

(Just about 6c a day).

HERE THEY ARE!

A specially selected group of extraordinary values to feature Royal's sensational new "Friend-Making" drive. Read the descriptions carefully — study the illustrations — then send for your choice TODAY on FREE TRIAL! If satisfied, pay on ROYAL'S Liberal Terms.

Just send your name and address now with only $1.00 deposit — just state age, occupation and if possible, 1 or 2 credit references. All dealings strictly confidential. No direct inquiries — no red tape — no interest or extras — no C. O. D. to pay on arrival.

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10 DAYS FREE TRIAL

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Every ring or watch carries ROYAL'S written guarantee backed by 43 years of fair and square dealing.

America's Largest Mail Order Credit Jewelers

Bulova Ranger $24.75
In Natural Rolled Gold Plate

NA-8 . . . BULOVA'S greatest gents' wristwatch value. Streamlined Yellow Rolled Gold plate case with handsome, new Link bracelet. 15 Jewel BULOVA precision movement; fully guaranteed, absolutely accurate time-keeper. A man's watch for men — an unbeatable value! $24.75 — $1.00 down — $2.38 a month (just 8c a day).

17 Jewel Only $19.75
Westfield "Sky King"

NA-7 . . . Smashing value in a famous make wristwatch! 17 Jewels; curved to fit the wrist. Fully streamlined Yellow Rolled Gold Plate case. Genuine leather strap. $19.75 — $1.00 down — $1.88 a month (about 6c a day).

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